

**Rev Dr Mark Gray: A reflection on the days we are living...**

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022 in Bannside Presbyterian Church**

**Readings: Jeremiah 18, vv.1-12; Amos1, v.2-2, v.9**

I have thought and thought and thought again about what to share with you today.

Faced with the truly dreadful scenes and stories coming out of Ukraine; faced with a cost of living explosion the likes of which we have not seen in decades; faced with seismic forces set loose in so many different dangerous directions that it feels as if the world is reeling, perhaps to be upended and undone, where do we go? How do we even begin to make sense of it all?

After thinking and thinking and thinking, I have only an image to offer you.

It is an image that grows from the insight of Jeremiah, as part of his participation in a rich and challenging prophetic tradition.

The image is simply this: God as a potter, looking at the world through tear-blurred eyes, but still working away.

The picture of God as a potter clearly comes from our reading. We often think of our lives as the clay in God's hands as God shapes them in faith; and that is an important way of envisaging the process of spiritual growth.

But here – I hope you noticed – God is shaping the affairs of nations. With relevance and resonance for our contemporary context, the message is that God will respond to how a country both conducts itself on the international stage and how it treats its own people, especially the poor. And every country will be held to the same standard.

There will be no divine preferential treatment: Israel's special status, its idea that it is exceptional – elect and better than everyone else – will not make a difference.

Jeremiah picked this idea up from Amos, who graphically drove it home right at the start of his prophecy.

Picture the scene: there Amos is, speaking to the leadership of Israel, explaining to them, as he names every neighbouring country one by one, why God is going to punish them all.

Do you know the reason?

It's because each has committed a variation on the theme of aggression or invasion or atrocity. For Amos, all nations will be judged on how just they have

been, because all nations have the God-given capacity to work out the difference between basic humanity and flagrant inhumanity.

You can see the leaders of Israel smile: by this point in their history, they have become smug and self-righteous. On account of their interpretation of God's unconditional commitment to them as a people, they believe that this does not apply to them. They stubbornly assume God will never act against them in any way. They think they can do whatever they want without blowback.

Amos disabuses them of their false sense of security. He says that Israel will indeed face the consequences of its own injustice.

This is sobering stuff for all concerned in war and oppression in any age. It underlines that no innocent suffering is overlooked by God, from whatever source or side it comes.

Russian cluster bombs in Ukraine are utterly inhuman, but so too are American cluster bombs supplied to the Saudis for use in Yemen. There is innocent blood in both Russian and Saudi oil.

For Jeremiah, ultimately, this type of suffering reduces God to tears. "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears," says God, for God just wants to weep and weep and weep day and night at the brutality of what is going on in Israel and the world.

This brings us to the image of God as a potter, looking at the world through tear-blurred eyes: looking today at the aggression and carnage and heartache in Ukraine...and weeping.

But God doesn't have defective eyesight or selective memory or a divine form of attention deficit disorder. So, over recent history, God has been looking at the heartache and carnage and aggression in the former Yugoslavia, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Palestine, Myanmar, other places we can name and some we can't...and God has been weeping.

God is weeping with refugees pouring out of Ukraine; weeping with them at their plight and at the human tragedy of it all; weeping also in part, perhaps, in relief at the outpouring of compassion and welcome they have received; weeping, in part perhaps in regret that other refugees and asylum seekers have been met with cold hearts and razor wire; weeping at how some are treated as children made in the image of a lesser God.

God is weeping at lost lives and wrecked futures, particularly of children: God is weeping at the outrage of a maternity hospital shelled in Mariupol.

I remember hearing a man called Izzeldin Abuelaish tell his story about another war zone. He is a gynaecologist and infertility specialist, who had worked in two Israeli hospitals, where he had made many Israeli friends.

At the height of the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2009, three of his young daughters were killed by Israeli shells fired directly into their bedroom. Izzeldin Abuelaish emerged from this trauma and do you know what he did?

He wrote a book about reconciliation, entitled *I Shall Not Hate*. If you recall, for this war the BBC refused to broadcast the Disasters Emergency Committee Appeal for Palestine, though it knew well that 1,200 Palestinian children had died in a short period of time.

But God does not turn away or lack compassion. God is weeping at the horrendous consequences of miscalculations in war; and God is weeping at war crimes, wherever they take place; and perhaps too, God is weeping at what war does to the humanity of the soldiers who take part.

Sadly, we could go on and on and on: children in Ukraine dying for lack of access to their cancer treatment or from something as simple as dehydration; children in Iraq, dead many years ago because of lack of access to their cancer treatment or something as simple as cannisters of air.

God is a potter, looking at the world through tear-blurred eyes. But faced with the grim reality of war and siege and human despair, the prophetic tradition dares to say that God is still working away.

One of the best articulations of this massively counter-intuitive hope insists that despite loss and grief and, as Jeremiah puts it, our human capacity for undoing all that is good, even to the point of annihilation, God is still moulding the clay of international relations.

In burnt places, water will gurgle up to nurture new life; in places rendered barren, seeds of hope will sprout. Frozen hearts and lives will be thawed and infused with joy once more.

This happens because God infiltrates our best efforts and our worst to bring transformation. However impossible or unlikely anything like this appears to us now, be prepared: it will happen.

I leave you with the image we've been thinking about and exploring together: God as a potter, looking at the world through tear-blurred eyes, but still working away.

I leave you with the parallel image of Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem...and Gaza, Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and Ukraine; weeping over the machinations

of imperial powers and all their clients, who contribute to the horror; and Jesus laments, 'If you had only known the ways that bring peace; but for now, they are hidden from your eyes.'

Lent is about looking into ourselves and the systems of our world as deeply and as honestly as we can, without special pleading; so in light of that, I leave you with two questions:

As a human family, is this the best we can do in all these situations?

Is it not time to make an end of the approaches we have taken, before it really is too late?

Otherwise, as Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician, theologian and philosopher put it, Jesus will be in agony until the end of time.

---

The full worship service is available to view on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1OJmp6GHxE&t=47s>