

Sermon on Sunday 2 June 2024

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4. 5-12 & Mark 2. 23 – 3. 6

Kintsugi – Beauty in Brokenness

A few months ago, I ticked off something from my bucket-list. For years, I've wanted to throw pots (on a wheel – not at people, you understand, though I have been tempted).

I love that elemental thing of working with just hands, water and clay; a practice that's almost as old as our race. The pot is then fired at high temperatures and, if it survives the mercy of the kiln gods, there's that moment of alchemy when the glazes react and magically do what they do; each hand-thrown vessel unique; each one bearing the marks of the potter.

Our scriptures contain some beautiful imagery inspired by the art of pottery. We are 'like clay in the hand of the potter,' we're told, each wonderfully handcrafted by the Master Potter himself, and now held within those same expert hands.

It's something that the writer Paul picks up in his 2nd letter to the Corinthian church. Here, we read that believers are compared to jars of clay; earth-vessels filled with *treasure*.

This treasure, we're told, is nothing less than the light of Christ, the hope and presence of God within. And, bizarrely, this priceless

treasure is held within these ordinary, commonplace, fragile, humans like you and like me.

By way of background, the letter is written to a church rife with competition; a community where egos are causing quarrels about spiritual superiority. And, here, Paul is at pains to remind them that it's not about addition, about working our way up some spiritual ladder; it's about subtraction, letting go of our egos, our need to be seen, our need to be right. Because, when we are so full of ourselves, there's no room and, we often think, no need for God.

When the Christian psychotherapist Carl Jung was once asked by a student about his own spiritual pilgrimage, Jung replied that it consisted of climbing 'down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am.'

And there's freedom in that. We aren't really free until we empty ourselves of our ego because our egos will take up all the space reserved for treasure.

We are all little clods of earth, beautifully crafted to contain treasure; light, hope, love; the presence of Christ himself.

The theologian Ben Witherington observes that the Corinthians were well known for their pottery – not just their highly glazed pottery but their pots made of inferior clay that, when fired, would often crack and make great light diffusers. Paul's point is that our cracked imperfect exteriors are nothing to be ashamed of — they are vital. A well glazed pot keeps the light in; only a pot riven with

cracks can shine God's light in the world. That's how the light gets out, and as the great Leonard Cohen once sang, it's also 'how the light gets in'.

Some of you know that I collect pottery - West German art pottery from the 1960s and 70s. And to most collectors it's essential that there are no chips or cracks; the pot must be perfect. I don't mind chips or cracks, however. They tell a story.

You may have heard of the Japanese art of Kintsugi or Golden Repair. It's where broken pottery is mended with lacquer mixed with powdered gold or silver. So, rather than attempting to invisibly mend a broken pot, its brokenness, its story, is highlighted in precious metal. And in the end, it's more beautiful than it was unbroken.

Kintsugi has become for many a metaphor for embracing the beauty of imperfection. We are all broken, all perfectly imperfect, and there's a great freedom in accepting that. The writer Paula Goodyer says, 'As Christians we are not called to be perfect. We are called to be who we are with all our cracks and imperfections, knowing that God's glory will shine through those cracks into the world around us and that the gold of God's love will mend our brokenness into something far more beautiful than it was before.'

It's our cracks that make us who we are and it's through our cracks the light shines in and out.

Christians worship a broken God. When later in this service bread is broken, and I say those familiar words, 'This is my body, broken for you', it's a reminder of the Christ who became an earthen vessel, a clay jar like you and like me; and through the cracks of that humanity shed light into a dark world. And that's our calling, too.

But hold on, I hear you say, what about that time in Matthew chapter 5 v 48 when Jesus commanded his friends to be 'perfect', just as God is 'perfect'? That is, I think, an unfortunate translation of the original Greek word 'telios', which can be translated as 'perfect', but also means 'mature' or, even better, 'whole'. Here, Jesus isn't advocating an unobtainable and frankly unhuman perfection, he's calling us all to grow into wholeness, into becoming more of the perfectly imperfect human we were made to be.

The Christian calling is not a calling to perfection. It is a calling to remain uncomfortably with our imperfections so that God's glory can shine all the more powerfully into us and through us.

