

Being clay in the hands of a Divine Potter

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Season of Creation 1 – Pentecost+13 – Jer 18 1-11, Ps 139 1-5 & 12 – 18, Phlm 1-25, Lk 14 25-35

(Background: In 1989 the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Dimitros I proclaimed September 1 as the Orthodox Day of Prayer for Creation. Here in Adelaide, we began to mark the Season of Creation around 2000, from that September 1 day of prayer until October 4, the feast day of St Francis of Assisi. A group based here and led by Prof Norm Habel created and trialled new liturgies and a special lectionary across churches of various denominations around Australia and internationally. This group also founded the scholarly Earth Bible Project, whose writers seek to read and interpret Scripture from the perspective of Earth's own voice.

The Season of Creation caught on very rapidly here and overseas, and in 2008, the World Council of Churches invited all churches to observe the Season through prayer and action. In 2015 Pope Francis made the Season of Creation official for the Roman Catholic Church. The Season is now resourced by an international Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant advisory committee (which still includes Norm Habel). The resources they're developing are wonderful.

The committee has given this year's Season of Creation the theme Listen to the Voice of Creation which is very much in continuity with its co-beginnings with the Earth Bible Project.)

In my weekly, I described the development of the Season of Creation from its beginnings about thirty years ago. While I was writing it, I was suddenly struck by the pace and the

magnitude of the change it represents. Can you believe this of the Roman Catholic Church, the Worldwide Anglican and Lutheran Churches not to mention so many others? We've put another season into the church's year – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, **Creation**, and Kingdom. In the Church where change is normally measured in 500-yearly increments, this has all happened – and happened *ecumenically* – in a mere three decades.

I find this very exciting. Last week, I talked about the worldwide Church as the only organisation big enough to tackle the world's refugee crisis – but in the back of my mind, I had a niggling worry that getting something like that going ecumenically could be really hard. But today, look, we're embarking on an official church season which didn't exist twenty-five years ago. And a significant impetus for its beginnings happened in Adelaide. A small group of visionary people here decided to challenge the way we've read scripture throughout the industrial revolution – to challenge the distorted theology which permitted the exploitation and trashing of God's good Earth.

I'm glad to know we can change so dramatically for the better, because when I look at the readings set for today, they demand radical change. As God's Church, we must always be open to criticism; we must always be prepared to change dramatically; to turn from wrong ways so that in God's hands, we might be effective instruments of divine blessing for the world. We whom the Psalm depicts as woven from the dust of the Earth, we are called by Jeremiah to open ourselves to being clay in the hands of the divine potter, open to being reshaped by God into vessels of living water.

That call to dramatic change shows us a practical face in Paul's letter to his friend, Philemon. Paul is in prison and Onesimus, a runaway slave of his friend comes to him. Why, we don't know. There, Onesimus becomes a Christian, and Paul sends him back to his master, Philemon, but not for the

customary punishment. Onesimus carries this letter from Paul to Philemon which asks him to set his runaway slave free.

Paul wants Onesimus to work as one of his missionaries.

What Paul is asking Philemon is huge; he's asking him to set aside the conventional social expectation of severe punishment and instead, set his runaway slave free. Slavery was seen for millennia to be as much an economic necessity as economic growth is today. Imagine suggesting we challenge the doctrine of economic growth!

Dramatic change is very threatening, but it's actually the stuff of life. When we stop changing, it's a sign that life has stopped. But what more dramatic change could we be challenged with than Jesus' demands in today's gospel – hate your family; hate life; give up all your possessions. All the commentators agree that Jesus is using a form of hyperbole which was common among Rabbis of the time; make your point in a way that's so completely over the top that you'll get something close to the response you want from your listeners. They couldn't say he was being serious, could they?

Yet Jesus left *his family* behind for his mission; Jesus gave *his life* for the world; Jesus emptied himself of his possessions – his divine power and glory to be one of us. His birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection tell us his followers that profound change – leaving all our former assumptions about our priorities behind – profound change is not only possible, but a necessary prerequisite for followers of Jesus if God's mission – God's will – is to be done.

So what are we up against?

The Rev'd Dr Rachel Mash is Provincial Canon for the Environment in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. She helps us understand the change required for this world when she quotes Gus Speth, a US scientist and formerly an environmental advisor to the Clinton administration.

He says: *“I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we scientists don't know how to do that.”*

‘For such a spiritual transformation to take place’, says Dr Mash, ‘we need to awaken the sleeping giant that is faith communities. And the Season of Creation is one of the ways to do just that with faith communities.’

Dramatic change is needed, and we’ve shown already that across the worldwide Church, dramatic change is possible. So, let’s get on board with this Season of Creation. Amen.

Web links provided by Heather in her address to the congregation about restorative work in the Adelaide parklands.

Bush For Life – Trees for Life

Louise Flaherty past projects and plant carers

Bessie-Davidson Gallery

Aboriginal cultural burning