

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 8 September 2019

**Our writers are drawn from a variety of church backgrounds and pastoral contexts**, and all share, as Pope Francis has said, a ‘Common Home’, and have a contribution to make to the healing partnership of Christ with God’s Creation.

The God of the Bible’s tendency –seen in these readings– to embrace those we might consider as our enemy, points towards a conciliatory approach, rather than entering into a blame-game, a denial of the crisis, or complacent acceptance of the principles, while at the same time making exceptions for ourselves. The bottom line is love for your neighbour, as yourself.

### **Writers this week:**

Rev David Coleman

Richard Murray

Rev Sally Foster-Fulton

Rev Lindsey Sanderson

Rev Kathryn Galloway (Hymn words)

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## **Jeremiah 18:1-11**

It was an common sight in the ancient world, a potter working with clay, and Jeremiah uses this everyday activity to provide a theological insight. We recall that in Genesis 2:7 God first shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. As God’s hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, the lumpen substance is animated into a living being. By interpreting the action of the potter’s hands Jeremiah is saying that God’s people are like clay that has not yet been fired. We are mouldable, flexible, responsive to God’s creative skills, a material of possibility.

Clay however cannot be overworked without disintegrating. God cannot make us use our gifts, or direct our lives and our will. We have to remain supple. Formation may come through education and the practice of virtue, but we are also susceptible to bad influence, temptation, and corruption. Clay is stiff and sticky but when wet can be moulded into something that has the potential of producing something beautiful or useful. As unfired clay, we respond to the potter’s touch, to water, and to the wheel, as God continually responds to us. So God works tirelessly at the wheel, building on our strengths, and addressing our weaknesses.

God’s plans for us are not fixed, and they are not determined except insofar as we are malleable in the potter’s fingers. The problem for God and for us is that God’s artistry may be thwarted if we crumble. God has great patience, but there are also times when ‘tough love’ is necessary and the potter’s hand will press down on the clay and start again.

As a result of watching a potter at work, Jeremiah receives God’s instruction to issue a call for repentance to the nation of Israel. The last line of our passage offers a glimmer of hope, that, no matter how bad things get, the possibility for good remains for a nation and an individual. Just as the potter turns the wheel, so God asks the people to turn away from the evil they have chosen, and “amend your ways and your doings” (v.11). When we meet God in the everyday action of our lives, can we be transformed?

**Richard Murray**

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# Psalm 139

Four every second ...

Two hundred and fifty every minute ... Fifteen thousand an hour ...

Three hundred and sixty thousand a day ... Loved into being – us.

Intricately woven in the depths of the earth ...

Portion of the earth – beginning, travelling and returning into it. Part of the cycle of life, not separated from it.

Loved into being – us.

Knit together in our mother's womb;

Knit together through our common humanity; interwoven with the world, Not in dominion, but in communion.

Loved into being – us.

Can we imagine the depth of God's love for creation?

It is a love as vast as the sand – an innumerable, inestimable passion.

Can we fathom the embraced burden of God's love affair with creation and the human creatures created in the divine image?

Wonderful are God's works ...

The waves that crash majestically across rocks worn away through eons, and the gentle surf that sings its way onto the sand.

A sky lit up with sun, heavy with heat;

A day, dreich and dark and dismally beautiful.

Plants and populations,

their numbers bordering on bewildering, that feed our stomachs and our souls.

We mustn't equate 'in God's image' with 'having God's mandate to do whatever we want.'

God's love breaks through the boundaries of us to gather in everything.

In Micah 6:8 it says, you know, 'O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.'

When God searches the depths of our hearts and the steps in our path, what will God know of us?

**Rev Sally Foster-Fulton**

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## Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (Alternative reading)

In the wilderness beyond the Jordan, a liminal place, a place of promise, the Israelites have been listening to Moses delivering his farewell speech. Moses had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and guided them through the perils of the wilderness. Theirs would be a life lived in obedience, a faith practised and witnessed through their devout adherence to the Law.

The choice is stark: obedience or death. Love God and live: serve other gods and perish! The audience would have remembered that Egypt represented captivity; not only the enslavement of their bodies but spiritual enslavement to idolatry and its ultimate hopelessness. Their response would shape the nature of that future.

This word of God is delivered to God's chosen and redeemed people. So, when they are called by God to "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (v.19), this refers to much more than physical life.

The language of 'life' embraces good health, blessings, happiness, and fruitfulness. It also carries the sense of living, over the course of one's entire life, in the Wisdom tradition of steadfastness and righteousness (Proverbs 11:19). Opposed to the good life is the one who chooses another path, who does not hear and turns away from God to other gods. For the former, the consequences will be prosperity, numerous offspring, and a life filled with blessings. For the latter, there will be only death.

The people and God have entered into a covenant that is mutually binding. The future will depend upon the people's willingness to live in a way that reflects the alliance they've made with God, underwritten by their love of God and their neighbour. The future is noted in terms of possibilities. What Israel says and does will give shape to that future, but what that shape will be is not determined in advance; that future remains open to what happens within the relationship, even for God. In the event they chose the wrong path and turned their backs on God.

Is it choosing a Godly life to live a materialistic, hedonistic lifestyle while others in the world barely survive?

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## Psalm 1 (Alternative reading)

Placed at the beginning of the psalter, Psalm 1 functions as both an introduction and invitation to read the following psalms as an ethical reflection on what it means to live one's life in accordance with the vision presented in Scripture. So Psalm 1 offers a stark choice: do you "follow the advice of the wicked" or "delight [...] in the law of the Lord?"

The advisor of the wicked is not a pantomime character dressed in a red suit, breathing fire, and wielding a blazing pitchfork, but the Accuser, who seeks to undermine the guiding hand of the Lord. "Why follow the rules and regulations of the Law when you can do your own thing?"

Being righteous does not mean sanctimonious, smug complacency, or pious moralising. The righteous trust in God, not in themselves. The mental stimulation of studying the psalms that follow, and understanding their links to the biblical narrative, allows the reader to probe the heart and nature of God. This is a dynamic process that leads to a changed life that brings fulfilment and happiness.

A changed life is the gift of God's Spirit. Paul describes this new life, as "the fruit of the Spirit"; which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5:22).

God caused fruit trees to spring from the ground and bear fruit (Genesis 1:11-12) and for us to be "fruitful and multiply" (v.28). If we think of ourselves as a fruiting plant, Jesus promises that fruiting plants are valuable and will receive good care (John 15.5-6). If we follow the advice of the Accuser, however, we shrivel and become dry, lifeless husks blown away by the wind.

A cautionary note about this psalm. It can be read in a simplistic, black-and-white way. Situations arise where we are tested every day. We are complex creatures; life is not simple. The psalm describes the judgement of God in its stark reality. We are a tangle of roots drinking from the stream but our trunk and branches can easily be swayed. Either we bear fruit for God or we fritter away the vitality in our lives through self-obsession.

Richard Murray

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## Philemon 1:1-21

Paul wrote this letter in prison. He is concerned about Onesimus, a slave separated from his master for reasons that are not clear – there may have been a breach of trust (v.18).

Paul is subtly exercising his rhetorical skills and experience as a counsellor, appealing to the better nature of his "dear friend and co-worker". He is attempting to re-negotiate the relationship between two individuals of unequal social status, yet who in Paul's eyes are bound together as brothers in Christ. Paul is treading a delicate path.

Paul does not exert his apostolic authority over the convenor of the house church. His words are gentle; his focus on relationship. Paul is preaching reconciliation. "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me" (1:11). Perhaps a sly reference to the possibility that Philemon may have been a little too ready to give up this slave to provide service to Paul while in prison.

A conversion and transformation, through personal relationship, seems to have taken place in Onesimus' character. He is no longer 'useless' ('without Christ' in Greek), but is now living up to his name ('useful') by becoming a colleague of Paul in ministry.

Paul seems hopeful that Philemon will freely use his generosity of spirit and take Onesimus back into his household and release him from any indebtedness. The master who sent his slave to 'refresh' Paul in prison (as an elderly prisoner, Paul may have required special assistance) is now being asked to refresh Paul's heart in Christ, by accepting Onesimus back into his household without retribution. Is this a measure of the depth of forgiveness that the gospel requires of us in our relationships with each other?

Luke 14:25-33

Crowds have come to Jesus because of His wonderful message about the coming kingdom. They are travelling with him when Jesus calls a halt, turns to them and asks whether they realise that this journey is

not just a stroll in the countryside. The cost of discipleship needs careful reflection and Jesus illustrates this with a number of examples.

Jesus' first saying is framed in stark language: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple"(14:25). When we compare His hyperbolic language with the equivalent in Matthew (10:37), "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me," we perceive a different interpretation. Matthew suggests a loyalty akin to allegiance. Either way, the seemingly emotional language Jesus employs emphasises that the obligations of discipleship amount to primary allegiance to Him rather than to family.

The next saying emphasises the point about loyalty. Discipleship is defined by following Jesus and "carrying the cross." There are competing loyalties in life and the journey to Jerusalem will be a high cost choice. Again an audit of internal and external resources is needed because the threat of persecution was very real at this time.

Jesus assists with two more examples: the first tells of a landowner building a tower, either for storing produce or guarding his land and animals. Failures to estimate quantities of materials and their cost may result in the project remaining unfinished, due to a lack of funds. The end result will be a folly open to ridicule. The second story is about a king who has to assess both the demands of the military venture and the resources needed before setting out. It is better, then, to negotiate with the enemy long before a meeting in battle.

Each of these stories focuses on outcomes. We may want to jump into action but Jesus cautions that we should only do so when we have bravely assessed the consequences. We have to trust that God will provide us with resolution and grace to share our time, service and possessions when helping others.

**Richard Murray**

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# Sermon ideas

In the 1950-60s a BBC interlude film, "Potter's Wheel", fascinated audiences:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUzGF401vLc>

The film showed the hands of a potter as he threw a pot, accompanied by mildly engaging music. What held viewers' attention was that the potter never finished the pot; just kept remodelling it. As the wheel spins and the water flows, what does the potter feel in this lump of clay? What encouragement or resistance does the potter sense?

In the beginning, God made Adam, adamah in Hebrew, meaning the clay soil of the ground. We remain a creative possibility. God breathed life into the lumpen clay, giving us the gift of free will and the capacity to choose, but making us people who do not lack understanding. Do we remain supple in God's hands? God invited Jeremiah into the potter's house to observe God's creative skills and speak into Jeremiah's soul. He was fully present in this everyday activity and alert to what God intended to do to the nation Israel.

The people of Israel failed to listen to God's voice in the final sermon of Moses. Exilic readers of Deuteronomy lamented the warnings. That first congregation, on the border with the Promised Land, could have rooted themselves where the soil was good for growing, but allowed themselves to be controlled and manipulated by the Accuser, fated to be cast into the wilderness of exile like wind-blown chaff. The question for them and for us is this: "Is there any hope that we can succeed where previous generations failed?"

The message of Luke's Gospel calls for a radical change in our everyday lives; to be fully aware of the cost of discipleship and the competing loyalties in life. This may cause consternation in family and friends around us. It may cause division and unrest and raised voices, but Paul asks us to refresh our hearts and remember our capacity for love. Love is not the same as preference; it is an inclusive love. This means seeing beyond our own pettiness and prejudice into a societal vision of Christ, where God acts with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth (Jeremiah 9.24).

Meister Eckhart said, "Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God." We must be open to the Word calling us to notice things and experience the other. We need to recover a healthy relationship with one another in our everyday lives, based on humankind's baptismal mutuality and making best use of the way our roles and gifts complement each other.

Like Moses and Jeremiah we are called to widen and deepen public engagement with the causes of climate disruption, and the injustice caused to others by our inaction, in ways that resonate with our audiences and inspire them to action.

**Richard Murray**

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# Time with children

Whatever else you do: listen to young people, many of whom are better informed than adults on environmental matters.

Given the story from Jeremiah about the potter, which can be read with the children in a readily accessible version, how can we not, on this occasion, be tactile – with clay, dough, plasticine, or some other material that can be formed and re-formed?

Make sure that everyone concerned can get hold of the ‘clay’ and give it a good knead, to get the feel of it. Make sure there is enough for everyone to have two pieces. Encourage everyone to join in. Ask those present what they want to do in their lives, and what they would like to do for the world.

Suggest that they might want to make something to help them in that ambition. Or perhaps they could make a figure of themselves, as they would want to be.

Then give everyone just a little too short a time to make exactly what they want to do and tell them their time is up before they have finished. (But if someone is really attached to what they have made, let them hold on to it.)

Set aside the ‘first attempts’ then read the story again, and give plenty of time for participants to make things the way they really wanted them to be.

Display and affirm the results. Give thanks that, like God, we are able to change our minds.

**Rev David J.M.Coleman**

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# Prayers

Rev Lindsey Sanderson

## Prayer of Approach – Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Creating God,  
source and spirit of our being, we gather in worship.  
We join our voices in praise,  
for You have wonderfully made us in all our diversity,  
the shades of our skin and textures of our hair,  
the loops, whorls and arches of our finger prints and the coils of our DNA. Yet each one of us is known and  
cherished by You,  
who loves us with a fiercely protective love  
and wills us each to flourish in life.

We praise You,  
for there is nowhere we can go where we are outwith the limits of Your love.  
We praise You,  
for there is nothing we can discover that is beyond the limits of Your knowledge.

We praise You,  
for humankind is just one strand in the web of creation.  
When we look at the planet which we call home,  
we see Your creating power and intricacy in complex eco-systems that are adaptive to every climate and  
habitat upon our earth.

We praise You,  
for the gift of Your only Son, through whom the world is reconciled to You  
and who calls us to carry our cross,  
so the work of reconciliation may continue. Amen

## Prayer of Confession – Luke 14:25-33

Cross-carrying Christ,  
we confess that so often on life's journey we set down our cross and neglect to pick it up again.  
We neglect to carry the needs of those in poverty, preferring our own comfort and prosperity.  
We neglect to carry the needs of those on the margins, preferring instead security of the centre.  
We neglect to carry the needs of those who place demands upon our time, seeking instead quick fixes to their  
problems.  
We neglect to carry the needs of our planet,  
seeking refuge in the overwhelming nature of the task which lies before us.

Cross-carrying Christ,  
you have carried the cross for us and for the whole of creation. Your arms, which were forcibly extended in  
torture,  
reach out to us with love and forgiveness.  
Speak Your word to us, 'Your sins are forgiven'.  
Give us courage to pick up our cross again and follow You. Amen

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## Musical suggestions

**NOTE: Please source music from whatever book is to hand, though pay attention to the version of words.**

• CH4 1 (Psalm 1) – “How blest are those who do not stray”

CH4 140 – “Lord, your hands have formed this world”

CH4 97 – “O God, you search me and you know me”

CH4 139 – “Praise the Lord, you heavens adore him”

CH4 252 – “As a fire is meant for burning”

**Alternative words** to the tune of CH4 141. This version was used at the Environmental Chaplain’s induction in 2018.

1) Oh the life of the world is a joy and a treasure,  
unfolding in beauty the green growing tree,  
the changing of seasons  
in mountain and valley,  
the stars and the bright restless sea.

2) Oh the life of the world  
is a promise of blessing,  
in the rain that renews,  
in the heat of the sun;  
in the heart that confesses and the act that expresses  
all things and all people are one.

3) Oh the life of the world  
is the breath of our being,  
it is fragile and precious  
and offers a choice;  
shall we share the earth wisely,  
can we touch the earth gently,  
will we listen to earth’s silenced voice?

4) So give thanks for the life  
and give love to the Maker,  
and rejoice in the gift  
of the bright risen Son,  
and walk in the peace  
and the power of the Spirit,  
till the days of our living are done.

Kathryn Galloway

### **In the rocks are inscribed**

New words to sing to the tune Stowey ( for CH4 230,) first used at Greyfriars Kirk in February 2019.

1) In the rocks are inscribed more than we can discern  
how life finds a way, clings on, that we may learn  
how disaster and change bring forth wonders, inspire  
and diversity schools harmony in God's choir.

2) We may think we have learned, but we've only begun  
And looking more closely, find God's sense of fun;  
So much we were sure we had set down in stone:  
all those myths we imposed, certitudes, overthrown.

3) The Earth moves, Hills dance, and the Trees clap their hands  
midst our gross self-self-deception that violates lands.  
As continents migrate, we cling to denial:  
we persistent offenders, a species on trial!

4) Our hope is that God yet will journey our way;  
That deep sharing of Jesus gives hope, come what may;  
We hope to find grace in the witness long past:  
grace to open our minds, and to learn to act fast.

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### **Alternative, off-the-wall bonus:**

for small-group or other use.

Video Clip: Not the pot Pondering the implications of the story of the prophet Jeremiah/Jeremy's visit to the potter's workshop. God emerged as the one who reserves the right, always to change their mind. Stylised animation, rather than any attempt at realistic pottery. Music Prelude No. 15. Chris Zabriskie/YouTube Audio Library.