

MESSED UP – BUT IN THE MASTER'S HANDS

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Sunday 4th September 2016



The Sydney Opera House is an iconic structure known to people all around the world. But while it looks absolutely magnificent on the outside, the Opera House is fraught with difficulties on the inside. Aged theatre machinery, poor acoustics, lack of flexibility and poor disability access mar this jewel in Sydney's crown.

However, this all about to change as some 202 million dollars will be spent on upgrading Opera House facilities over the next 18 months. The Concert Hall and the Joan Sutherland Theatre will be improved while a new Function Centre together with a Learning Centre will be provided. Escalators and lifts will be installed as access points and public areas are upgraded.

Things that are supposed to look good but do not work so well can be annoying. I have always thought Sydney looks to be a magnificent place from the air. There is no better city in the world than Sydney when you view it from the comfort of your seat on an aeroplane - all those picturesque waterways, the beaches, the harbour, the towering CBD and the Harbour Bridge. But the view changes when your feet touch the ground and you start to drive home!

Average peak hour speeds on roads around the airport are now below 10km/h while the afternoon drive home along the M2 Hills Motorway from North Ryde now averages just 46km/h. And then there is the monster called Pennant Hills Road with is 10,000 heavy vehicles and 70,000 cars each day while Windsor Road sees peak hour travel speeds these days as low as just 30km/h.

It's true that the government is trying to fix things with the construction of the NorthConnex tunnel, the massive WestConnex project and such things like the new Northwest Metro and the proposed new metro between the City and Parramatta. But what becomes obvious is that we mess things up!

Life is messy. We get things wrong. What is supposed to look good sometimes falls short and what should work often doesn't. Here we put our "foot-in-it" and we just "stuff" things up"!

Today we encounter a story from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. It concerns a visit to a potter's house where the artisan is busily fashioning a vessel from the moist, malleable clay. The term "potter" here is based on the Hebrew verb *"yatsar"* meaning to "mould", to "fashion" or to "form" and it's obviously the intention of the potter to create something that is both useful and attractive.

But we are told the clay is "marred" or "spoiled". The clay is "messed-up" in much the same way as things that are created for their practical service or their aesthetic appeal are today bungled or botched either through incompetency, lack of vision, poor planning or human error.

Friends, in just about every circumstance one would expect the potter to simply discard the spoiled clay and begin again. However, Jeremiah emphasizes that the potter persists.

Like that rather flawed construction we call the Opera House, where the architects and the engineers persevere to make it a better place, so the potter continues to work with the clay. Indeed, we are told the potter *"reworks it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."* (v. 4).



Now, there are some interesting things taking place here. In this story the clay represents the people of Israel and the potter is God. Meanwhile, the potter approaches the task with purpose. It's not the artisan's intention to make a flawed pot even though the raw material that needs to be worked is marred, spoiled and messed-up.

Here we learn that God doesn't discard the clay. God doesn't right-off or turn God's back on the people. Rather God, the potter, persists. God, the artisan, perseveres!

This story is told for a good reason. For you see, it's a story given to us with the purpose of declaring God's relationship with God's people as being a dynamic, free one. In other words, God, the potter, doesn't treat the clay - God the artisan doesn't embrace God's people - as a lifeless objects that must yield or submit to the controlling hands of the creator.

Rather the relationship between potter and clay, the connection between God and God's people is a spirited, interactive one. It's one where the parties have a choice. The people can decide to either intentionally resist the potter or be purposefully formed by the artisan. Meanwhile, the potter can decide, depending on the people's response, to either persist and persevere with the community or walk away and quit the people.

Jeremiah speaks about this in terms of God being able to *"pluck up and break down and destroy"* (v.7).

Friends, this powerful story presents us with some poignant truths.

Firstly, the story says it's pretty "routine" to live lives that are flawed. It's actually quite "normal" to be "messed-up". And when you think about it, aren't we all just a little "marred", aren't we all just a little "spoiled", "impaired", "blemished" and even a little "damaged"? - I know I am!

Indeed, I make mistakes. I am deeply conscious that I am far from perfect. I even put my "foot-in-it" from time to time! But the thing that this story tells me is this - God persists, God perseveres with me. And, in your messed-up somewhat blemished state, God persists, God perseveres with you!

And here it's also important to remember that, in all of this, we can make choices.

God gives us the freedom to either - in our "messed-up" state - be reshaped, remoulded and recreated in the merciful, nurturing hands of the creator. Or we can - in our flawed, blemished states - adopt the path of autonomy, of going our own way, by ignoring or indeed rejecting the love, nurture and care of the One who creates us.

It's up to us!

An American preacher, when speaking at the Opening Ceremony of the National Council of Churches in the USA General Assembly some years ago, chose this text from Jeremiah. And, in doing so, the title Messed up, but in the Master's Hands was coined.

Messed up, but in the Master's hands - I really like this title because it speaks volumes to me.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are a "messed-up" people. There's no getting away from it. But, you see, our hope, indeed, our future, is in the hands of the One who can mould, fashion and form us into something quite beautiful.

And friends, this is what the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is all about. It's about God's unconditional, extravagantly generous love that says you and I are important. It says you and I are special - we have a future. And that future is in the loving, creative, transforming hands of the One who gives us life.

So, in all your "messy-ness", choose to remain in God's hands. With all your flaws and blemishes, choose to trust God. Allow God to remould, refashion and reshape you despite the raw material that we present to God not being as good as it ought to be.

For in of all of this, God will make us into something quite beautiful. God will remake each one of us into something very special!

There is a story called The Old Violin by Myra Welch which, I hope, speaks to you:

T'was battered and scarred, and the auctioneer thought it hardly worth his while to waste his time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.

*"What am I bid, good people", he cried, "who starts the bidding for me?"
"One dollar, one dollar, do I hear two? Two dollars, who makes it three? Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three,"*

But, no, from the room far back a gray bearded man came forward and picked up the bow, then wiping the dust from the old violin and tightening up the strings, he played a melody, pure and sweet as sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer with a voice that was quiet and low, said "what now am I bid for this old violin?" as he held it aloft with its bow.

"One thousand, one thousand, do I hear two? Two thousand, who makes it three? Three thousand once, three thousand twice, Going and gone", said he.

The audience cheered, but some of them cried, "We just don't understand. What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply, "the Touch of the Masters Hand."

And many a person with life out of tune - all battered and bruised with hardship - is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd much like that old violin.

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine, a game and he travels on. He is going once, he is going twice, he is going and almost gone.

But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd never can quite understand, the worth of a soul and the change that is wrought by the Touch of the Masters' Hand.

