

Ceramics have been a lot on my mind in the last week or so. I was on Vancouver Island visiting friends who told me they were cataloging their ceramics collection and planning to bequeath it to a museum in Victoria—and, indeed, they took me to the museum to see an impressive exhibition of contemporary ceramics art. I came home, where I daily contemplate my wife Georgie's ceramic sculptures, many of them impressions of scenes in New York and Florence. Then I visited my friend Joe McCaffery at the Narrow Land Pottery to buy a hostess gift for my Canadian friends. I picked a wood-fired piece that was unglazed. It was not monochromatic however: the side that had faced the fire had a visionary streak of sunlight in contrast with the somber backside. (When it comes to firing, the potter's control over the outcome is never preplanned with certainty.) Joe made an urn for Georgie's ashes last year and (without asking) made another for me. I've not used it yet, but my children know where it is, and seeing Joe brings my ultimate destiny to mind.

When I got home and looked up today's lessons, imagine how I responded to the reading from Jeremiah! [18:1-11] God sends the prophet to the studio of a potter, saying "I'll give you a message there"—an object lesson. The potter is turning a pot., and he makes a mistake—ruins it. Mistakes in pottery when the potter is still working with moist clay can be rectified: roll, pound, and press it back together and start over. "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel," says God, "just as this potter has done?" A nation can be broken down, but it can be recreated. Time after time, human institutions and human individuals have been broken down, shattered, destroyed. But the clay can be re-formed: reformation, re-creation is possible. God is like that; re-forming, re-creating, endlessly at work.

My reading this summer has included three long novels by Robert Harris about the Roman statesman, orator, and diplomat, Marcus Tullius Cicero. The Roman republic, which persisted for half a millennium, was bi-partite: SPQR, Senatus Populusque Romanus: the Senate and People of Rome. (Our founders admired and tried to emulate Roman republicanism: The US Senate and House reflect Senate and People of Rome.) In the second half of the last century before the common era, however, the system broke down. Powerful members of the senatorial class manipulated the populace and arrogated power to themselves: Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Augustus: the Roman Empire. Even so strong a Roman republican as Cicero was sucked into the centrifugal forces that were destroying SPQR, the Republic. It

is hard not to wonder whether twenty-first century populism could be headed in the same direction. Our prophetic hope, our resurrection faith leads us to trust that the clay can be reclaimed and reformed.

The letter of Paul that we heard in toto this morning is addressed to a family house church headed by Philemon and his wife Apphia, (A woman addressed by Paul!)\_Their slave Onesimus had escaped and run to Paul, who was in prison. He had become Christian and, in that sense, a son to Paul. Paul is loath to give him up, but sends Onesimus back to the Philemon household with the prayer that he will be accepted as a fellow Christian, and therefore their equal. It is a sacrifice for Paul to return Onesimus; it will be a redemptive sacrifice of the house church to take him in. Reformation.

The Gospel this morning [L:uke 14:25-33] is a tough one. We have heard so much about Jesus and his mother—the grieving mother of the Pieta who becomes the chief intercessor for mankind; the unquenchable fountain of pious sentimentality—that “whoever... does not hate father and mother, wife, and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Whew! That goes against every ethical principle of our upbringing. Jesus does go on to say that one has to put the goal first and orient everything else to that. You don’t start to build a building that you know you cannot finish. (Well, I could think of a number of examples of unfinishable walls or unfinished structures.) Priorities. The ultimate goal—“Salvation”— comes first (where you are going). I think I’d rather say building the realm of love, justice, peace (God’s kingdom) comes first.

I happened yesterday on an article by the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson which included a sentence paraphrasing John Winthrop in his “City on a Hill” speech in which he envisioned the society that might be built in the new world. The sentence for me sums it all up: “Scripture gave authority to a vision of equity and also grace as standards of social interaction by which Christianity had not chosen to abide.”\* [reread in the present tense: “Scripture gives authority to a vision of equality and also grace as standards of social interaction by which Christianity has not chosen to abide.”]

That sentence is our challenge. Can the clay of the still-wet, still-un finished but ruined pot be beaten, rolled, pounded and put again on the wheel to build a perfect (or, even, just better) vessel?

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\* “Which Way to the City on a Hill?” *New York Review of Books*, July 18, 2019, 43-46.