

29 November 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

At some point in my secondary schooling, in art class, we were let loose on some clay.¹ Among the standard projects of that time was the task of sculpting a small bust, a head and shoulders model of a man or woman – about 5-6cm tall. Thankfully we didn't have to model anyone in particular. My one is of a man, with quite a narrow thrusting chin, a rather surprised look on his face, and a cloth cap on his head. The one made by my twin brother bears a slight resemblance to Frankenstein's monster or to Lurch from *The Addam's Family*. My younger sister in due course made one too. Far more artistic than her brothers she made a bust of an elegant woman with her hair tied up in a bun. I don't remember whether our youngest brother made one or not: perhaps the standard projects had changed by the time he went through college.

Over forty years later my mother still treasures the quirky little busts, and has them on permanent display on the china-cabinet. In a way I find it embarrassing to see displayed this example of my ineptitude as an artist. In another way, I can see that Mum values them as expressions of her children.

I can't imagine how I would feel if these little busts were to be broken [to be busted!].

As we begin Advent, the reading from Isaiah 64 gives us a beautiful image of who God is and who we are in God. In a great deal of Isaiah it is *God* who speaks through Isaiah to the people. In chapter 64, however it is *Isaiah* who speaks directly to God. Isaiah prays –

... you, LORD, are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

¹ This sermon owes most of its content to the video sermon of Renninger, from which it freely quotes.

It is one of the most strikingly beautiful verses of scripture. Here we begin Advent being reminded that we are created by God. Everyone, from the greatest to the least; everyone, including those we don't like or don't trust; everyone, from those who have given their best to us to those who have failed us. We are all lovingly created by God. We are all shaped by God's loving design, and put on this earth for God's loving purpose. We are precious in God's sight – just as those busts are precious in Mum's sight for what they represent of her children who made them.

But pottery gets broken. Quite often this part of the story gets forgotten. This part of the story gets forgotten when we try to justify some behaviour on the basis that "God made me this way." It gets forgotten when some who are not Christian try to deny the existence of a good God on the basis of the evil they see around them.

Pottery gets broken. And Isaiah says we get broken too. There is scholarly debate about the period this part of Isaiah was addressed to, and therefore of the specific background to things he describes in his prayer. But nevertheless, we can hear the general, timeless, truth as Isaiah vividly describes some of the ways we get broken: Isaiah says our hearts grow hard and we wander away from God; Isaiah says we are sinful; Isaiah says we have guilt because of our behaviour; Isaiah says we have become unclean people, unclean like a filthy cloth.

We are God's pottery, but we get broken.

And because of our brokenness Isaiah prays that God would come to us and heal our brokenness. From the depths of his being, Isaiah prays "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

We need Advent because we are broken and despite our best efforts there are some things in life that we just can't fix on our own. Only the one who made us can remake us and make us whole.

Paul says God makes us whole by sending Jesus Christ who comes to dwell among us. God heals the human family by taking flesh in the womb of Mary and being born in Bethlehem and dying on the cross in Jerusalem and rising again. The healing

began long ago in a little community near Jerusalem, but the healing is still not complete in all its fullness in the communities we inhabit today.

The gift of Advent healing can only begin if you and I are courageous enough to name what is broken. As we begin to pray in Advent each of us needs to ask what in my life is broken?

What in my relationships, in my heart, in my spirit, is broken?

What is broken in my actions, in my moral choices?

What is broken in my spiritual life, in my emotional life?

And do we dare to examine the life of the Church, the body of Christ, today, and ask what is broken? We might name such things as the brokenness of our failure in our generation to live a costly discipleship. The brokenness of our regret over decline. The brokenness of gossip and speculation. The brokenness of judgementalism. The brokenness of our hurts and betrayals. The brokenness of unforgiveness.

And do we dare look in our neighbourhood, nation, or world to name what is broken? The brokenness of poverty and homelessness. The brokenness of addiction and gambling. The brokenness of the elevation of the freedom to choose and the satisfaction of all wants into modern-day idols. The brokenness of corruption and deep injustice. The brokenness of racism and sectarianism. The brokenness of terrorism and war. The brokenness of our polluting and plundering the earth.

There is so much that's broken.

But that is precisely why we have Advent, and Christmas, and Lent, and Easter. We Christians know that our personal and communal healing comes through the teaching, life, death and rising again of one person – Jesus Christ.

So if we know that we need him, then we understand what Advent is all about. It is about watching for Jesus' presence here and now among us. It is about watching for the signs of Jesus' action in our midst. It is about watching for the results of his love.

Jesus says, keep awake, watch, pay attention.

Again, there is a great deal of scholarly debate about the circumstances and audience for Jesus words presented in Mark 13. Were his words about what was to occur within a generation or two after Jesus spoke, when in 70AD Jerusalem was destroyed? Or was he speaking about some end of time phenomenon? The former seems more likely; but regardless of what the correct answer is, we can take the general point that God has a purpose for humankind in the world. And we can take too the point that the fact that the world doesn't acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus means that his followers need to be on guard and watchful. And to say this is to effectively say that the brokenness of the world as it is now means that we have a task to do as we participate in the inauguration of God's work of setting things to rights, as the potter, in love, sets about fixing the brokenness that exists in what he beautifully and perfectly made.

Yes, there's a great deal to do between now and Christmas – shopping, wrapping, work to complete before the summer shut-down, end of year functions to attend, preparation for going away on holidays or projects to organise for a “stay-cation”, and so on and on

But don't let all that busy-ness become an excuse to avoid the important Advent truth: that something important in us and in our world is broken, and healing will only occur when we experience more deeply the passionate love of Jesus.

We need to experience more deeply the passionate love of Jesus, and we need to help others do the same.

Our own experience of brokenness, as we are glued back together, can become the means through which others who are broken can experience the grace of God. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul puts it this way:

⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

We, jars of clay, broken and restored, are vessels of the treasure, the light of God, the good news that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus said, Watch; Keep awake; Pay attention. We need to attune ourselves to the work of God in us, in our midst, and in the world. We need to attune ourselves to the ways of the potter, so that we can see our brokenness for what it is, and to seek the potter's remaking where it is needed.

So in these Advent days make sure you spend time every day in prayer; make sure you keep gathering with the Christian community for fellowship and worship; make sure you take time to read the scriptures – and not just reading them, but studying them, and allowing them to change you.

Take time to talk with God, and say thank you in your prayer.

You can watch for Christ by looking for him. Look for Christ in the people you meet. Look for Christ in the things you do and in all you see. Watch for him, and keep awake. He's already there.

In Isaiah's prayer, he acknowledged that God comes to the help of those who gladly do right, to those who remember God's ways.

Doing what is right. That might mean resisting the urge to buy far too much, to do far too much, or to complain way too much. Rather, do what's right. Pay attention to those who are most in need. Seek ways to make a difference to those who experience brokenness. Spend time with, and share love with, those who need it.

On the cross, Christ was broken. But Christ didn't stay broken. In the power of the Father's love, Christ's brokenness was made whole. That same divine love wants to

make you whole, and wants to make all of creation whole. Again, I repeat, that wholeness won't come in its fullness until Christ appears again – but the in the ministry of Jesus and especially in his resurrection, we see the breaking into human history, ahead of time, signs of what the power of the potter-Father's love will accomplish for all when the times reach their fullness.

A day or two ago, I was talking to someone about their Baptism long ago, and what it meant to them. Baptism has many layers of meaning. But one important layer of meaning is that it is an entering into the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. We go down into the watery grave, and die with Christ there, before coming forth into new life, as a newly-made Christian.

In baptism a choice is made: a choice to commit one's life to Jesus as Lord, and thus to say that no-one and nothing else has our allegiance. In baptism the clay submits to the potter to be made whole.

We know of course that there will be brokenness of various kinds encountered in the future, but in baptism we become part of a family that is committed to being with the potter at all times.

And in baptism, we make a public declaration in word and sacramental action, a declaration of the saving story of Jesus in which all can be remade.

God, who has called you to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful and will keep you firm to the end. [1 Corinthians 1:8,9, adapted]

God is the potter, we are the clay. The God who made you knows the transformation you need this Advent. What a gift. Are you ready to receive it?

Sources:

- <https://vimeo.com/243960286> Father Michael Renninger, Pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Richmond, Virginia, preaches a sermon called "This Little Pig Got Broke"
- Wright, *Mark for Everyone*
- Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, IVP BST
- McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*
- English, *The Message of Mark*, IVP BST
- Cole, *Mark*, IVP TNTC