

# Bits of Precious Clay

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Advent 1: Isaiah 64:1-9

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*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...to make your Name known to your adversaries...* (Isaiah 64:1-2)

This desperate plea in Isaiah is no idle request. The Jewish people, or at least some of them, have been granted permission by their Persian overlords to return from exile to their homeland. How bitter it was when they arrived. Jerusalem was in much the same state as 50 years before when it had been conquered: the walls were rubble, the city in ruins, the Temple burned to the ground; the wretches who managed an uncertain existence among the ruins were not all that keen on these newcomers who talked as if their job was to take over the rubble pile. The exiles must have thought: *This is God's holy city? Give me a break! If God wants Jerusalem rebuilt, then God better be quick about putting all this right: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your Name known to your adversaries..."*, and to us!

If only God would set everything right. If only God would build up strong walls so that we might be perpetually safe behind them. If only God would make enemies disappear, clear away the wreckage of life, and make a pleasant road through the wasteland. If only God would do something miraculous with the wave of a divine hand, as if by magic. Those surely must have been some of the thoughts in the minds of the returning exiles; perhaps you have had an occasional thought like that (I have!).

In front of the Jerusalem rubble the prophet comes to himself, and so should we. *Yet, O Lord, you are God. We are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.* (Isaiah 64:8). God works miracles, yet they are not the works of magic, they are the work of a potter. The potter's work involves great cost. For the potter the cost involves intimacy with the clay – a hands-on approach. The potter cannot make something from a distance but must get the hands covered with clay. No matter how unwieldy, or hard, or obstinate the clay the potter must keep molding, must keep the vision in mind and heart, must persevere in wanting to bring form out of formlessness. For the potter the cost involves everlasting love regardless of our often dismal response, regardless of ignoring God, even regardless of not wanting to be loved by God. Unlike what we know of human potters, the cost to the divine potter involves death – not the appearance of death, not a special effect done with trapdoors or mirrors – but real death, the death of Jesus on the Cross. God's love for us is so awesome that God will go to the place of our greatest fear – to the moment of human annihilation – so that our deepest fear, our nothingness, will be filled up with the love and life of God. The Lord God of hosts fills up death with life, through sacrifice.

The cost for the clay that is, for us, is also great. It will not happen (snap) like that. God will not change us into something we are not nor make the unpleasant, unwanted or dangerous magically disappear. The cost for us involves patience and trust: patience with God, and others, and especially with ourselves; patience in living through and making amends for the consequences of our wrong actions. It involves trust that God's desires for us and for others really are best. Our cost involves faith that in God is our true life and true freedom. Our willingness to be truly molded by the potter means living without the constant inner self-centered monologue about how things ought to be and how others ought to be, and how God – and everyone else – ought to be making our pathway straight through a pleasant land.

Our cost may include God leaving us alone in front of our rubble for a time, so we may truly feel the feel of our formlessness without God. Our cost means we will want God to get God's hands on us, that we yearn for God to soften us up so that God may finally make something of us, that the work of the potter is not that of a moment, or an hour, or a weekend; that there is no end to the beauty and usefulness that God can make of us; that God's hands be always upon us.

Our cost involves placing ourselves in God's hands, being content to become whatever God desires us to be, and content to let others be what God desires them to be. As the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century monk, John Chapman, wrote: *You are the block, God is the sculptor; you cannot know what God is sculpting you for, and you never will in this life. All you need is patience, trust, confidence and God does the rest. It is very simple – it is simplicity itself.* (The Spiritual Letters of H. John Chapman)

Today we come again to this holy place, at a holy time. We begin a new Church year. We light an extra candle; we say strange, mystical words of prayer, Scripture, Creed and Liturgy; we testify to a great truth of God's love: that no matter how many times we have fallen in the past year, no matter how surrounded by the rubble of dumb choices and hurtful words and actions done by us or to us, no matter how ruined we might seem – God desires to begin again. Indeed, every time we fall God desires we get back up again. There won't be much magic here – at least as the world understands such things – but there will be the promise and hope of transformed lives, which is a much better sort of magic. If we listen with the ears of the heart, and look with the eyes of faith, and offer ourselves to God with patience and in trust, we will come to know God's true magic and miracle in our life and in the lives of our brothers and sisters, in all creation.

In faith, we consciously and joyfully offer to God our bits of precious clay, that God will mold in us a heart of flesh to replace the heart of stone; we offer our bits of clay, that God will fill up our empty formlessness with grace and truth; we offer, that God will transform our rubble into something beautiful, useful and holy for God; we offer our lives, that God will mystically make us into Christ's hands, feet, eyes, ears, mouth and heart in the world; we offer our bits of clay that God will change our sin into holiness, our darkness into light, our death into life. We offer ourselves, that God will embrace us, encircle us, breathe yet more Holy Spirit into us; that by God's mercy we will be made one with all the holy saints of God living and dead and yet to come, even these saints to our right and left, in front and behind, so that the work of God may be unbounded, so that Jesus Christ our Lord will be known, worshipped and obeyed in our lives, in Christ's Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, in the world made through and for Christ.

This is the joy of God's heart: God shaping, molding and evermore creating us into the perfect likeness of joy and life: Jesus Christ. For the work of the potter in us all and for the grace-filled invitation to begin again with each new year, each new day, each new breath – Thanks be to God!