

SERMON AT GELORUP: 9/12/2008: ADVENT 2c: GEOFF CHADWICK

MALACHI 3:1-14

FULLER'S SOAP AND REFINER'S FIRE.

Malachi announces that when the prophet comes (suddenly, I might add) it will be like "fuller's soap or "refiner's fire." Curiously these two similes are not very pleasant.

Fuller's soap was used by Fullers to wash raw wool clean of oil, dirt and other impurities. It was done by pounding the wool with a club or the feet whilst adding a primitive form of soap. Sometimes the Romans used stale urine as the "soap", and rough clay was also used as well. Being a fuller was far from glamorous!

Refining by fire is more familiar to us. Recently I witnessed the gold pour at the Perth Mint. The same bar has been heated, poured and cooled for many years and it now has a purity of 99.99%. The purist bar ever poured was 99.9999% and set a world standard. The fire to melt gold of its impurities must be over 1064 degrees Celsius whereas ,Silver has a melting point of 961.8 degrees Celsius.

Nevertheless, the purity comes after much effort. It takes a lot of work to make that much heat and to get that sort of purity!

Incidentally the mint has a set of scales which tell you your weight in gold at the current price. A fortnight ago I was worth \$5 118645.00!

So what of the prophet then? Why all this talk of soap and fire?

Malachi's message was proclaimed after the Hebrew people had been allowed to return to Israel after 70 years in exile. Here was an opportunity for a new beginning. Yes, there was a promising beginning, but not everything went well. The temple had to be rebuilt and the Law of Moses reinstated, but because the country was small and insignificant, the people

began to lose hope in a promised new “glorious Kingdom.” As time went by their temple worship became empty and their faith cold. Malachi’s message came to them as a warning: “Yes! The Lord will suddenly come to his temple” but it will be as “fullers soap” and as “refiner’s fire.” Or putting it another way, you might be expecting glory, but pain will come first.

Malachi, as Gods’ mouthpiece, lists the following complaints against the people:

- sorcery
- adultery
- bearing false witness
- oppression of workers
- oppression of widows and orphans
- not caring for aliens
- not tithing
- and offering blemished scarifies to God.

Quite a list- and perhaps not one we would like to have held up against ourselves!

But that’s the point – it is!

Most of us hope to live good an upright lives and most of us would hope that we don’t need too much refinement. We look at the above list and reckon we’re not too bad. We hope that if the prophet came tomorrow we would be “worth our weight in Gold.” But we do know, if we are really honest, that we do have some impurities. Maybe they aren’t as blunt as Malachi’s list, but they do exist.

- perhaps the use of fad diets and fad unproven medication is a modern form of sorcery?
- Perhaps promiscuity is a modern form of adultery.
- Not telling the truth is yet to be eradicated.
- Paying workers as little as possible or demanding more of them with less resources is not so unusual, even these days.
- Not caring for widows, orphans and aliens means we still have the poor with us.
- Failing to be generous.
- And giving to God what is second best.

Whist I wouldn't want to point the finger, lest three be pointing back at me, Malachi's message must still have its power today. Every now and again, we need to be washed with fuller's soap or purified by fire. Every now and again we all need a little pain to help us change for the better.

Now there's a famous prayer by Brother Bernard of Assisi, who was the first companion of St Francis. He too was rich but sort the way of the poor Friar. I think his prayer will help us!

*Lord, I want to love you, yet I'm not sure.
I want to trust you, yet I'm afraid of being taken in.
I know I need you, yet I'm ashamed of the need.
I want to pray, yet I'm afraid of being a hypocrite.
I need my independence, yet I fear to be alone.
I want to belong, yet I must be myself.
Take me, Lord, yet leave me alone.
Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.
O Lord, if you are there, you do understand, don't you?
Give me what I need but leave me free to choose.
Help me work it out my own way, but don't let me go.
Let me understand myself, but don't let me despair.
Come unto me, O Lord...I want you there.
Lighten my darkness...but don't dazzle me.
Help me to see what I need to do and give me strength to do it.
O Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.*

– Bernard, SSF

Remember, the Lord will *suddenly come to his temple*. But here's the thing- maybe this isn't a sudden one-off world event. Maybe it happens every day. Maybe the Lord comes, in many and varied ways to those who allow the Spirit to build a temple in them.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**