

The Refiner of Silver

Reading Jackie's reflection yesterday about mirrors and seeking the face of Christ in our own reflection, it made me think of the passage from Malachi chapter 3. We often hear of our Creator God forming and shaping His creation, breathing life into Adam, knitting us together in our mother's womb...indeed we talk about our Christian life as "formation" - the process of being moulded and shaped into the likeness of God.

I have been reflecting with some of my colleagues from around the world these past few weeks about what it has been like to be in this time of waiting – some are hoping to be made Deacon this year and some, like me, have been waiting to be priested. The overwhelming message that has come out of these discussions together is that it has been a time for "paring back". That our expectations of the grandiose event that is ordination have been transformed into something of a different shape – and in this process, so has our understanding of what it is to be ordained. Our needs and wants have been burned off, refined. I heard many times, my colleagues saying something to the effect: "I don't mind what it looks like. I just want to be ordained into God's Church and know that I am where God wants me to be."

And although we were all saddened that the shape of ordinations in this time of pandemic will mean we cannot share that special service with everyone we would like to be there, we spoke of it being simple, quiet and intimate. For me, it speaks about where I am with God in these days as I prepare for the vows and oaths I will take next Tuesday.

And so, to the passage from Malachi:

Malachi 3:3

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

There are many references in the Old Testament to God as a refiner of silver. I have listed some of them below to reflect on throughout the rest of today.

What does this say about the nature of God? It can be a bit unrelatable until we know a little something of the process. I am fortunate in that one of my

close friends is a silversmith, so having read a piece about it I was able to verify my questions.

To be a silversmith is to be a true craftsman. They must hold the piece of silver over the fire to first heat it up. During the process of refining silver, it must be held in the very centre of the fire where the flames were hottest, so as to burn off all the impurities in the metal. The silversmith must sit with it, holding it in the heat and he must never take his eyes off it because if the precious metal is held in the flame for even just a moment too long it can become damaged. The process is both delicate and robust at the same time.

It is a timed process: one action cannot be started until the previous part of the process is completed. The intricate work of shaping and moulding, twisting and hammering cannot begin until the precious metal is properly prepared. When the basic shape is formed then the more delicate work of decorating can begin. But the metal is still blackened – oxidised in the heat. It is only when the final form is complete that the buffing and polishing to bring out the shine can take place. And with silver, it can tarnish easily, so we ourselves must on occasion take a cloth to it and polish out the marks and then at times take it back to the craftsman to have it thoroughly cleaned to restore the shine. It is therefore a lifelong process. Each polish and buff, each thorough cleaning takes off the very finest of layers from the metal to reveal its true nature underneath.

When is the process done? When is the refinement complete? When the craftsman can see his face in it.

He has held the piece all the while, without taking his gaze from it, working on the blackened twisted metal because he has a vision of the loveliness that the piece will be. It is patient, skilled, intentional and intricate work that can only be done by hand. And the Craftsman can see in his mind's eye the end result. He knows what it will be.

What does this say about the nature of God?

Peter has bought me a silver Chalice and Paten as an ordination gift. It is a set that was made in the 1950s and it arrived a few weeks ago, securely wrapped in its case but very tarnished. There were many sets to choose from once we'd started looking – many very fancy laden with precious stones and engraving. The choice was vast of both new and second hand. But I wanted something that was preloved. Something that held within the precious metal the prayers

and history of those who had come before to find Christ in the chalice. I searched for something that was handmade. This piece is a simple hand-hammered design with a plain cross at the base and a polished enamel knob.

It is solid and so it is weighty and when I hold it the curvature of the bowl fits fully into my palm so that I may hold it in the same way as I would hold and support the head of newborn, with the whole of my hand. The bowl is wide, and as I gaze into its gilded interior I can imagine it filled with the precious blood of Christ ready to receive and welcome us.

The weight will feel very different when I am pouring just a little into it for Holy Communion when we come back to church in August (God willing). And it will very different again when it is filled with wine for all when restrictions are finally lifted and we are in a time of safety and may share the common cup.

The paten is large and wide. The underside is hand hammered to match the chalice and the surface is gilded like a golden mirror. Soon I hope it will be filled with hosts, a true feast for the hungry as we come together. It is large, to hold we hope as many hosts as we can.

It struck me that the true gift is not the precious metal, the beautiful design or “worth” of the finished item, but the hours of labour to make it, the love and history held within it and the service that has been and will now continue to be offered through it.

When we come together for Holy Communion we are coming together for a feast. And we dress our table as beautifully as we are able – not to show off but to make the experience beautiful and attractive for all the senses. We dress our altar as a sign of welcome and to show that it is a very special occasion, which of course it is, and will feel even more so when we are finally able to come together to celebrate and worship our creator God, the Craftsman. So, it is fitting then that we decorate it and serve with handmade items – fair linen cloths, decorated altar frontals, handmade silverware – we are celebrating God the Craftsman and honouring Him and so each other with the very best that we may have.

When the set arrived, it was very tarnished. I spent hours cleaning it gently, lovingly, gratefully. It was a slow and labour-intensive task. Peter asked if I wanted help (he has more elbow grease than me!) but I enjoyed it. While my hands were working I had to watch what I was doing so I didn't miss a bit, I was

focussed. I felt every curve and line, every indent and polished it until I could see my face in it. I knew it was a beautiful set when I bought it tarnished and grey, but as I was polishing it I was imaging what it was like to be the maker – and how satisfied he or she must have been when they could see their face in the precious metal of their finished creation. All the hope and love that was poured into the making.

I leave you with some questions to ponder upon whilst reading some of the many references in the Old Testament to God as the refiner of silver and gold.

What does this say about the nature of God?

How does it feel to be held by God, the Craftsman, the Creator – knowing that you are being formed and refined as a precious metal in his skilled hands?

What does that refinement look like and feel like to you?

Other references in the Bible:

Psalm 66:10

For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us like silver.

Proverbs 17:3

A crucible for silver and a furnace for gold, but the LORD is the tester of hearts.

Proverbs 25:4

Remove the dross from the silver, and a vessel for a silversmith will come forth.

Isaiah 1:25

I will turn My hand against you; I will thoroughly purge your dross; I will remove all your impurities.

Jeremiah 9:7

Therefore, this is what the LORD of Hosts says: "Behold, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the daughter of My people?"

Daniel 11:35

Some of the wise will fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

Daniel 12:10

Many will be purified, made spotless, and refined, but the wicked will continue to act wickedly. None of the wicked will understand, but the wise will understand.

Zechariah 13:9

This third I will bring through the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are My people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'"