

## Waiting for the Soul-Cleanser!

Malachi 3:1-5

Something strange and wonderful happened to me the other day while standing in line at a Starbucks waiting for my coffee. As the young woman took my order, she suddenly appeared quite beautiful. Whether or not she was beautiful with the kind of beauty we usually notice...well that I really cannot say. In fact, looking back on it now, I think she was of average appearance at best. Tall and slender, with black and blond hair, a stud in her nose and tattoos on her arms, she really wasn't anything to catch the eye. But she was suddenly radiant – almost glowing with the beauty planted in her at her creation – the beauty we sometimes refer to as the *imago dei* – the image of God.

And she was not alone in this. As I turned to get my sugar and my creamer, I looked around at the other people sitting in Starbucks, and saw the same thing in them. There was the older man, sipping coffee and playing games on his phone, the middle-aged man with a laptop before him and books scattered around him, and two young women sitting off in the corner, chatting over their cups of latte, and all of them were beautiful in their own way. It was one of those luminous moments when I seemed to see through the veil of their human flesh to the deeper beauty within them all – a beauty that lies within each of us as well.

This incident reminded me of a video I saw on YouTube a few weeks ago. It was a video shot by Shea Vaughan-Gabor at her performing arts high school in Chicago. Shea traveled the halls of her high school filming random students. As she did so, she asked them to look into the camera and then she simply said, "I'm taking pictures of things I find beautiful." In almost every instance, those teenagers would blush into the camera, then smile, then glow with an iridescent light as something of their inner essence began to shine through the veil of their flesh for all to see.<sup>i</sup>

Yes, we human beings are beautiful. Joe, you're beautiful! Ottie, you're beautiful! Bob and MJ, you're both beautiful. D, Ann, and Carrie, you're all wonderfully beautiful! All of you, each and every one of you, are marvelously beautiful! And you're beautiful because you're made in the image of God!

In his essay entitled *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis says this about the nature and the beauty of we human beings: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit...Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses."<sup>ii</sup> Indeed!

Yes, you are beautiful. I am beautiful. We are all beautiful together because we are made in the very image of the invisible God! Deep within us there is the image of Him who made us, and that image shines through the veil of our flesh from time to time to disclose the beauty that God has planted in us. So, with the ancient Psalmist we can rightfully cry, "It was you (O Lord) who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in

my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works (including me!); (and) that I know full well." (Ps. 139:13-15)

Nevertheless, as beautiful as we are, our beauty has been marred and tainted. If we are often guilty of looking in the mirror and not seeing our God-given beauty, then we are also often guilty of looking in that same mirror and not seeing how the image of God has been stained within us. For all of us have erred from time to time, and those errors have not been without consequence. They have sometimes corrupted our character, perverted our nature, or distorted us deeply in ways we may not always fully perceive.

But innocent errors are not what I am speaking of now. I am speaking of those intentional acts of wrong that we knowingly commit against some moral standard of conscience, culture, or our Creator – acts that we know will likely bring harm to us or others – and yet we commit them, nonetheless, for some selfish or self-serving purpose. In a word, I'm speaking of sin. And it is this sin that defiles us, corrupts us, distorts us, and diminishes the beauty that God first put in us. That's why we need a Soul-Cleanser, someone to come and cleanse our souls of the accumulated garbage that diminishes the beauty for which we were originally made.

The book of Malachi speaks about the coming of just such a Soul-Cleanser. Malachi was written sometime after the Jews had returned from their captivity in Babylon. The temple had been reconstructed, the priesthood and sacrificial system had been restored, the wall around Jerusalem may have been rebuilt, but things were not quite right with the people of God. The priests were corrupt, the offerings were defiled, and the people were lax in their spiritual practices. (Mal. 1:6-2:9) Divorce was rampant. Men were putting away their wives for little or no provocation, exposing them to grave financial hardship, and then marrying other women - women they found more satisfying. In addition, some, maybe many of the men were marrying foreign women and adopting their foreign gods. (Mal. 2:10-16)

Malachi 3:5 goes on to list a whole host of other sins that also plagued the nation. There was sorcery, adultery, and perjury. Workers were oppressed and their wages were withheld. Widows and orphans were neglected. Immigrants were mistreated. In general, there was a universal lack of reverence reflected in an attitude of disobedience and a failure to pay the tithe. (Mal. 3:6-12)

Clearly, God created his people for better things than these. He made them to be beautiful – so beautiful, in fact, that all the nations of the world would be drawn to God through them – but their beauty was marred and their loveliness stained by these and other sins. Nevertheless, God was not content to leave them in this defiled state. He loved them too much to abandon them to this condition. The whole message of Malachi is predicated on this love for in the first verses of Malachi, God speaks to Israel and says, "I have loved you, says, the Lord." (Mal. 1:1-2) And because he loved them, he would not leave them in their corrupted condition. Instead, he would come to them and do a soul-cleansing work in them, restoring them to the beauty for which they were first created.

Located near the middle of the book, as though it is the very heart of the message, God speaks to his people through our text and says, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.” (Mal. 3:1-4)

With these words, God promises to come and cleanse his people. Notice how he speaks first of a messenger sent to prepare the way for his coming. We Christians believe that the messenger was John the Baptist. In fact, Jesus identifies John as such in the gospels. (Matthew 11:2-11, Mark 1:1-4, and Luke 7:18-28) And then, after John the Baptist came, the Lord himself appeared in Jesus Christ; he appeared among his people and also in his Temple to cleanse them from their sin. He did this cleansing work by calling his people to repentance. In fact, his first sermon was this: “The time is fulfilled,” he cried, “and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mk. 1:15) He not only called his people to repentance, but he also promised to forgive them and cleanse them if they did. In fact, he was so reckless with forgiveness that he sometimes pronounced it on people without any outward or obvious sign of any actual repentance on their part, just as he did in Mark 2:1-5 when he forgave a paralytic, and just as he did again later in John 8:1-11 when he forgave a woman caught in the very act of adultery.

But Jesus not only forgave people their sins, he also gave people his Holy Spirit to burn their sins away. That’s why John the Baptist, his forerunner, said, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Mt. 3:11)

Yes, Jesus was and is like a refining fire. He was and is like a fuller’s soap. He was and is the great Soul-Cleanser. And notice how he did, and still does his cleansing work. He takes a nugget of gold and burns away the debris so it can shine all the brighter in the clear blue light of day. He takes a soiled garment and washes it clean, restoring it to its innate beauty.

Now the burning and the washing can’t be easy. There’s often a bit of pain involved in each. The fire burns, of course. And fuller’s soap refers to fulling, an ancient form of washing that involved trampling or beating a piece of cloth to loosen the embedded debris and then soaking it some powerful cleansing agent to make it clean. Neither form of cleansing comes without pain. Loosening the filth that fouls our lives, and burning up the dross, is never easy. We are often very attached to our sin and are loath to let it go. But in the end, it’s a great mercy and a tremendous blessing to be clean, to be restored to our intended beauty, to shine again like gold, to be blazoned once more like a gorgeous garment! My friend, don’t you want to be clean? Really, don’t you want to be clean?

A long time ago the prophet Malachi looked with longing for the coming of the great Soul-Cleanser to cleanse his people Israel. His longing was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus was and is our great Soul-Cleanser. In this Advent season, we look back at Jesus' first appearing to see how he came with a cleansing message on his lips and a cleansing Spirit at his command. Then we look around and within to see the cleansing work of Jesus going on around us and working still within us even now. But as we do so, we likely see that we are not as clean as we could be...that our beauty is still marred and our glory still dimmed by the sin that's still in us and still working on us. So, we look up to Jesus with longing in this advent season and pray that he might come again to cleanse our hearts of all defilement and make us shine like gold again, refined in character as he intends. Yes, this Advent season, let us pause to pray, "Come Lord Jesus, cleanse us still." And all God's people said, Amen!

---

<sup>i</sup> *People react to being called beautiful* by Shea Vaughan-Gabor at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aW8BDgLpZkI>

<sup>ii</sup> *The Weight of Glory* by C.S. Lewis. Preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1941: published in THEOLOGY, November, 1941, and by the S.P.C.K, 1942. Located at <https://web.archive.org/web/20131204041910/https://verber.com/mark/xian/weight-of-glory.pdf>. Current as of December 6, 2018.