

Refined by fire

One of my favourite childhood memories was waiting for goods trains to pass the level crossing a few miles down the dusty road from our farm in inland Australia. Most of the cargo, on its way to the coast from the remote mining town of Broken Hill, was raw silver, lead and zinc.

From my vantage point you would never have thought the grey ore in the rail trucks had much value. Only when these stones were crushed, sifted and subjected to enormous heat would their real value and beauty emerge.

The refining of silver is a delicate process. Ask any silversmith. The temperature has to be just right. If it's too low the process of refining won't even begin. If the furnace gets too hot, the silver will be spoilt. How, then, does the silversmith know for sure that he's getting it right?

First, refining silver requires enormous concentration. The silversmith needs to observe carefully as the heat does its work on the molten metal, never taking his eyes off the action for even a moment. Then, timing is everything. Leave the silver on the heat seconds longer than the ideal and its value is seriously diminished.

That raises an all-important question. How does the silversmith know that the molten silver has been heated for the optimum time, at the optimum

temperature? The answer is that there comes a magic moment when the silversmith can see his image reflected in the precious metal in his charge. Then, and only then, it's time to take it off the fire.

The Old Testament prophet Malachi compares God to a silversmith. 'For he will be like a refiners fire...' (Malachi 3:3). There are times when, under God's providence, we will be tested and refined by fires of adversity. These times can be devastating, as Job found. But as we trust his grace the image of the divine silversmith will become even more visible in us, and people will notice. As St Paul wrote, 'And we, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

There's an old chorus that I've often used as a prayer dedicated to colleagues and the people around me:

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.
All his wondrous compassion and purity.
Come thou, Spirit divine,
All my nature refine,
'till the beauty of Jesus is seen in me.

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