

# **Sermon on Sunday 2 February 2025**

## **by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

*Readings: Malachi 3. 1-5 & Luke 2. 22-40*

*Malachi 3 v 2: Who can endure the day of His coming? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap....*

You might recognise that from Handel's Messiah, *'Who may abide the day of his coming... for he is like a refiner's fire....'* But, curiously, the bit about fullers' soap didn't make it into the libretto.

What's this 'Fullers Soap' bit about? By the way, it's not a brand!

Does anyone know what a Fuller does? Or rather, did? The industrialisation of the textile industry made the Fuller obsolete. But as a grandchild of the West Riding woollen trade, Fullers are part of my heritage. And if your name happens to be Fuller, or Tucker, or even Walker,

they are probably part of your heritage, too. But not a very glamorous one.

Raw sheep's wool is dank, smelly and greasy. In olden times, sheep's wool was combed, spun and woven **before** it was washed. That grease, the lanoline that kept our ovine cousins warm and dry on the rain swept hillsides, made the woollen yarn soft, easy to spin and weave. Without the grease, it got fluffy and hard to manage. Only when it had been woven could the cloth be properly washed and cleaned of grease. That's where the Fuller, or Tucker, got involved.

And fuller's soap, depending what resources were available locally, could be a mix of alkaline clay, ash from burned vegetation, and ammonia. And before the development of the chemical industry, what was your only source of ammonia? Stale urine! We are not talking Palmolive here!

The fulling, or tucking, of a piece of cloth, involved trampling, or 'walking', the cloth (one root of the surname 'Walker') in a bath of cold,

dirty, foul smelling alkaline liquid for hour after hour. But this wasn't just about making the cloth clean. Once the lanoline had finally dissolved, with the combination of the alkaline soap and the constant tread of the Fuller's feet, the fibres of the cloth would matt together to make it dense, tough and weather resistant.

Only then could the cloth be rinsed, and stretched out in the sun to dry and bleach on a tent rack, before it was ready for dyeing and tailoring.

So, what is Malachi trying to tell us about 'God's messenger' that he foretells – a figure that Christian tradition has, from the beginning, identified with Jesus?

'He is like fullers' soap'. Messy, hands on – or rather, feet on; gruelling, but essential. God's messenger will not shy away from the dirty jobs, the repetitive, menial jobs. He goes where the grime is, where the grease is, and shifts it. It's a slow job. It's not like slinging your sheets in the washing machine, pressing the on switch and

coming back when the job is done. He is patient, persistent. And if Christ is the Fuller with his soap, who is the greasy cloth? Is that us?

What does Malachi expect from his Messenger? An urgently needed time of national moral renewal. Malachi lived around 400 years before Jesus. Judea was then enjoying a period of semi-autonomy as a province of the Persian Empire. The tribe of Levi – the priestly caste that formed a kind of political and religious aristocracy – are condemned as corrupt and unworthy.

The litany of social tensions that Malachi lists in our reading has an uncomfortably contemporary feel about it, doesn't it? Low wages, exploitative employers, lack of concern for the vulnerable and marginalised in society, antipathy towards foreigners, public dishonesty, confusion in sexual morality.

We sometimes speak of society 'unravelling'. Like a badly woven piece of cloth. Malachi preaches **national** renewal – but a nation is made of individual people, just as woollen cloth

is made of single threads of yarn. The fullers' soap, once it has shifted the grease, breaks down the fibres and allows them to matt together, to become inseparable, to make the cloth strong and weatherproof.

Is that what the Fuller promises when he has done his cleansing work? A community that is stronger, unified, warming and protective? One that will not unravel and leave its individual threads weak and broken?

The Fuller is in it for the long haul. It takes as long as it takes. For one man or woman, perhaps a lifetime. For a nation, well, does the fulling process ever reach an end?

If God is the weaver, he has worked with us, combing and spinning and weaving us while we are still greasy and unwashed. But in Christ the Fuller, he promises us that the work will be one day completed. But the work of God's Grace is not a one-program wash.

We read of Simeon and Anna in the Gospel

passage. Two aged and faithful servants of God who are delighted, right at the very end of their lives, just to glimpse a reaffirmation of God's loving purposes for his world. They know they will not live to see fulfilment that Jesus will bring, but they, too, are in it for the long haul. Enough for them to know the work will go on. Wise enough to know that even in Jesus, there is no snap victory just around the corner. There will be conflict and grief, for the nation and for the individual, but the cleansing and refining work will continue.

Enough for Simeon to take his reward. 'Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.' Some scholars believe this to be a military expression in the original Greek, the honourable discharge of an old soldier. He knows the war is not over, but he has 'done his bit', earned his long service medals, and is happy to trust the future of the cause to a new generation.

Simeon, and Anna, were in it for the long haul. Doing their part in a struggle towards God's justice that makes progress, but is not yet finished. Living and dying with a faith that looks

for its reward beyond the achievements of our own lifetimes.

Thus, we, too, welcome Malachi's Messenger, our Christ. Ready to do the dirty jobs, and the long hours, for our sake. He calls us to do our appointed shift, until WE can depart in peace. HE will be staying on until the last yard of cloth is clean, dry and spotless, and worthy of its divine weaver.

