

Will you join in our crusade?

The invitation of the Gospels unlocked by the inspiration of *Les Misérables*

Introduction

In the customary excess of the world we live in the word ‘phenomenon’ is regularly over-used. Yet, in the case of the musical *Les Misérables*, it seems well-justified. It has played to tens of millions of people worldwide since its first performance in 1980 and, in movie form, garnered three Oscars at the 2013 Academy Awards with Hugh Jackman, Anne Hathaway, Russell Crowe et al. Its success becomes all the more remarkable given that the musical’s subject matter originates from a vast, sometimes rambling book published in 1862. What usually happens is that such works become more and more obscure until they drop off the horizons of all but the very literary. Why then does this story continue to capture so many hearts?

Some 2000 years ago, a carpenter’s son from Nazareth stood in his hometown synagogue and read from what we now know as the Old Testament book of Isaiah. *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* He added: *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4: 18-21).

His message was simple. Jesus envisaged a society in which all wrongs would be righted because his God would be at the center. His Spirit empowered role was to make it possible for that new world to come into being. Incidentally, you’ve probably worked out from the Bible passage above that Jesus’ God wasn’t the hard, nasty, punishing kind of god. His God was full of understanding love and restoring grace. Just the kind of god you couldn’t help but like if you bumped into them at a party!

Jesus invited people to realign their mind-sets and lifestyles in order to bear witness to this new way of being. He called them to be disciples, people who would commit their lives to him; learn from him and put his ideas into practice. His undying belief in those ideas would lead him to the cross but also to an ultimate vindication of his vision. And his parting words were for his disciples to continue their mission by going global; spreading the message of discipleship and teaching others as Jesus had taught them.

Why are people so captivated by *Les Misérables*? Could it be that, at its heart, it’s nothing less than the dream articulated by Jesus. As we enter into Valjean’s struggles to conscientiously live a new life. As we rejoice to see his role as protector of the poor and downtrodden. As we weep at the cruelties heaped upon Fantine by uncaring people. As we resonate with the students’ ideal of a better world to come. Are we not simply seeing the world through God’s eyes and connecting with the God-given hope planted within us and all humanity?

Let me make you a confession. I am not normally a great fan of musicals; nor of French literature. The only reason I went to see the musical, back in 2006, was

because my son was taking part in a school production. Like many others I came away a convert. Not only was I humming all the melodies but a Christian message seemed to leap out from virtually every line. Soon, I was working through the unabridged English translation of the book (which weighs in at well over 1000 pages). Not surprisingly, I found much that had been omitted in order to keep the musical to a manageable length but again the Christian themes, so evident in the musical, were there before me. My reading spread through the days leading up to Good Friday and the story seemed a perfect complement to the retelling of those familiar events from Jesus' life.

A three month sabbatical followed the following year, the fruits of which you now have before you. In writing this book I have sought to let *Les Misérables* and the Gospels spark off one another in the conviction that, at heart, they are one and the same story. My prayer is that *Les Misérables* does for you as much as it has for me.

Steve Mann
June 2013

How to use this book

There are two ways to use this resource:

- (1) If you wish to use the book specifically for Lent then begin on Ash Wednesday and finish on Easter Sunday. The final two days then become optional extras.
- (2) Otherwise, the book can be enjoyed as a seven week course at any time of year, to be started on whichever day you choose.

At its heart is a 42 day devotional reading plan that will take you through the entirety of Victor Hugo's classic novel. Each day begins with a Gospel passage and will require five to ten minutes of your time. Use whichever version of the Bible you feel comfortable with for these readings. You may also find it helpful to keep a pen and paper close by in order to note down any thoughts or questions that arise. Is any prior knowledge of *Les Misérables* needed? No. The readings will give you all you need to build up the story in chronological order but, if you do get the chance to read the book/watch the musical/see the movie before you start, then this won't go amiss.

The material is also grouped around seven themes at the heart of Christian experience:

- Week 1 – Grace
- Week 2 – Responsibility
- Week 3 – Truth
- Week 4 – Compassion
- Week 5 – Fellowship
- Week 6 – Darkness
- Week 7 – Reconciliation

Every seventh day takes a break from reading and contains questions for group discussion or personal reflection. If you are undertaking the course as a group, it should lead to a meeting between one and two hours long, dependent upon your size and talkativeness.

The weekly questions follow a pattern. This begins with *Setting the Scene*, an opportunity to follow some of the action from the DVD of the 2013 movie release. Mostly, this stays very close to Victor Hugo's original. Be aware, though, that there are times when events and characters from the novel are considerably adapted or even omitted altogether. Don't worry if you do not have a copy of the DVD. Just move on to the next section.

There are two sections that bear the title *i2i* ('eye to eye'). The first – 'issues to explore' and 'irritants' – follows *Setting the Scene*. The second – 'insights' and 'implementation' – comes at the end of each session. The idea behind each is that members of a group sharing this journey are there to support one another. This is important both in making sense of our initial responses to the material but also in helping each other grow from the experience. My hope is that the first of these sections will prompt plenty of discussion. Remember that the things we react against can often be as illuminating for us as those things to which we respond favorably. I rely on the discretion of group leaders as to how the second *i2i* section is handled. You know your group better than I do! Some will feel comfortable sharing aloud; others may wish to use the time for silent reflection. And do remember the importance of confidentiality for any small group meeting. What is said within the group should stay within the group.

The *Day 6 Dilemma* section revolves around a difficult moral choice faced by characters in the novel and featured on the sixth day of each week's material. This title was also deliberately chosen to reflect the Genesis 1 account of the creation of human beings. Such choices are a fundamental part of being men and women trying to live in relationship with God.

The final section, *Living it Out*, is based upon the twelfth chapter of Romans where Paul gives some very practical, down-to-earth advice on how to live out our lives as Christians. This chapter begins with the word 'So' or 'Therefore' and follows on from the previous eleven chapters in which Paul has given a glorious exposition on no longer being under the curse of the Law but living by the Spirit of life and grace. What Paul is saying is: 'That was the theory. If you want to live it out in practice, here's how you do it'. It will become a useful guide for us too, as we seek to relate each week's material to our everyday lives.

Bible passages printed here (unless otherwise indicated) are taken from the New International Version and direct quotations from *Les Misérables* are indicated by italics or, in the case of smaller phrases, single quotation marks. Quotations used in this study have been taken from the following English translations:

- Norman Denny, Penguin, 1982;
- Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee, Signet Classic, 1987;
- Isabel Hapgood, 1887 - freely available through Kindle or as a download from Project Gutenberg.

1

Grace

The man opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Really? You knew what I was called?"

"Yes," replied the Bishop, "you are called my brother."

Week 1 - Day 1

Read Luke 14:12-27

We are embarking upon a journey. The journey is a historical one as it takes us through some turbulent years in the history of France. The journey is a personal one as we follow one man and his struggles with life, faith and conscience. And the journey is a timeless one as we become involved ourselves and realize that the major themes of this book are our concerns too.

The events of *Les Misérables* take place in three main locations. The book begins in Digne (1815), a town in the South of France between the Alps and Provence. Here we witness the conversion of the main character, Jean Valjean. The story then moves to Montreuil-Sur-Mer (1817-1823) in the North of France which, today, is just under an hour's drive from Calais. Finally, the bulk of the action occurs in Paris (1823-1833). Through it all, the lives of our main characters will intertwine.

The France of which Victor Hugo was writing had gone through a period of great upheaval. The French Revolution of 1789 was a political coup which ousted King Louis XVI and established a republic. This was followed by a military coup in 1799 as Napoleon Bonaparte seized control and went on, in 1804, to declare himself emperor. Under Napoleon's command, France's empire grew and grew, until an ill-fated drive into Russia in 1812 proved his downfall. In 1814, he was exiled and the monarchy was re-established under Louis XVIII. 1815 saw the brief return of Napoleon but after defeat at Waterloo it really was the end. The reigns of Louis XVIII and his successor Charles X were marked by a renewed disdain for constitutional government and matters reached a head in July 1830 with barricades and fighting on the streets of Paris. The result was a political compromise. Charles X and the Bourbon dynasty went into exile to be replaced by the 'grey banker' Louis Philippe. This restored the peace but lack of any further major constitutional reforms meant that agitation stayed close to the surface. It would return again in 1832 and form part of our story.

The early years of the nineteenth century also saw turmoil in the wider area of Western Europe.

- It was a time of political turmoil as countries continued to move from the absolutism of monarchy to more democratic systems of government.
- It was a time of military turmoil with countless wars being fought and no country being exempt.
- It was a time of economic turmoil as any prolonged period of war always is.
- It was a time of demographic turmoil as the flow from country to city, sparked by the Industrial Revolution, continued unabated.
- It was a time of climatic turmoil as Europe remained under the grip of a mini-ice age.

All of these factors had their effects within society but as always the effects were felt most strongly by those least able to cope – the poor. These are the *Misérables* of the title.

One of Hugo's chief intentions was to draw attention to the plight of the poor and the systems that oppressed them. In a letter to the publisher of the Italian edition of the book he wrote:

You are right, sir, when you tell me that Les Misérables is written for all nations. I do not know whether it will be read by all, but I wrote it for all. It is addressed to England as well as to Spain, to Italy as well as to France, to Germany as well as to Ireland, to Republics which have slaves as well as to Empires which have serfs. Social problems overstep frontiers. The sores of the human race, those great sores which cover the globe, do not halt at the red or blue lines traced upon the map. In every place where man is ignorant and despairing, in every place where woman is sold for bread, wherever the child suffers for lack of the book which should instruct him and of the hearth which should warm him, the book of Les Misérables knocks at the door and says: "Open to me, I come for you."

In 2001, George W. Bush spoke of the war against terrorism being a crusade. He very quickly discovered that certain words can be explosive. In some minds, the immediate association was with bloody medieval battles as Christians sought to wrest Jerusalem from the 'Muslim infidel'. Why then use the word in the title of this course?

Firstly, the line 'Will you join in our crusade?' comes from the closing song in the musical version of *Les Misérables* to which we shall return later.

Secondly, because the word 'crusade' returns us to the idea of a journey. As we journey through Lent, we accompany Jean Valjean and Jesus on the road to the cross.

On Ash Wednesday many Christians will be marked with a cross of ash from the burning of the previous year's palm crosses. That is actually the derivation of the word crusade. It comes from the Latin word that means 'to mark with a cross'. The medieval crusaders certainly heeded Jesus' challenge. They were prepared to pick up their crosses and lay down their lives in Jesus' name. Yet they also illustrate the pitfalls awaiting us. Jesus does not show us a destructive God who calls us to violence but an all-including God who sends us out to the vulnerable – the poor, crippled, blind and lame. How easy it is for us to be diverted from God's plan by our own agendas.

Reflect for a moment on these words from the Ash Wednesday liturgy and the times that we are so sidetracked that we fail to see the *Misérables*.

"We confess to you, O God, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives, our self-indulgence and our exploitation of other people.

We confess our preoccupation with worldly goods and comforts, and our envy of others.

We confess our blindness to human need and suffering, our indifference to injustice and cruelty, our misuse and pollution of creation, and our lack of concern for the generations to come."

Finally, ‘crusade’ in its modern usage has the sense of a campaign to make things better. As we journey, remember that God doesn’t just want to change you. God wants to use you to change the world.

Week 1 - Day 2

Read John 3:1-17

The book of Exodus tells the story of God forming a covenant with Israel. At the center of that relationship is obedience and the keeping of the Law. By the time of Jesus, these laws and commandments had swelled so much with interpretations and clarifications that it would have been virtually impossible to remember the whole lot, let alone keep it. Those who tried hardest to keep the Law and to ensure that others did so were the Pharisees.

When Jesus met with the Pharisee Nicodemus, it was a meeting of old school and new school. There was, literally, a new wind of the Spirit blowing. Jesus tells Nicodemus that, if anyone wants to be part of God’s kingdom, trying to keep the Law isn’t enough. That person must also undergo a radical change of heart and mind akin to being born again.

The problem with the Law is that, on its own, it cannot produce righteousness. It can only tell somebody when they have fallen short. As such, it is continually condemning. That would be OK if you took Paul’s approach or that of the writer of Hebrews. Paul writes that the Law was only ever intended to be like the paedagogos, the household slave who was responsible for keeping the children of a family in check until they were sufficiently mature to go to school (Galatians 3). Likewise, in Hebrews 11, we are given a long list of Old Testament greats and told that they weren’t saved by their adherence to the Law but by their faith.

If people aren’t going to be saved by keeping the Law then how will they be saved? Jesus points the way. In the wilderness, poisonous snakes had attacked the Israelites and many had died. God commanded Moses to make a snake and to parade it at the top of a long pole. If anyone who had been bitten looked at this snake they were healed. In the same way, Jesus predicts his own death lifted high on the cross. Anyone who trusts in him will be saved to eternal life.

And then comes these tremendous thoughts. God’s love for us is so amazing that he will hold nothing back – not even his son – in his attempts to win us. God is truly on our side. God’s love in Jesus is not a condemning force like the Law. Jesus is not there to condemn us but to save us, to bring us life. Paul takes up the theme as he writes to the early church in Rome.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful

nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.” (Romans 8:1-3)

The tension between the old covenant and the new covenant, between law and grace, is one that runs through the whole of *Les Misérables*. It is represented in the book's two central characters, the reformed convict Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert, the policeman who personifies the Old Testament Law.

Javert is born in prison, the son of a convict and a fortune-teller. His career choice is motivated by the thought that his only hope of escaping from the dregs of humanity is to step outside of society as its guardian.

We are introduced to Javert as a tall figure dressed in a grey coat with cane and battered hat. He is ever vigilant with a cat's vision in the half-light. He never shows emotion and hardly ever laughs. On the few occasions that he takes leisure time, he chooses the company of a book (which he hates!). His faith in law and authority is total.

This man was composed of two very simple and two very good sentiments, comparatively; but he rendered them almost bad, by dint of exaggerating them,-- respect for authority, hatred of rebellion; and in his eyes, murder, robbery, all crimes, are only forms of rebellion. He enveloped in a blind and profound faith everyone who had a function in the state, from the prime minister to the rural policeman. He covered with scorn, aversion, and disgust everyone who had once crossed the legal threshold of evil. He was absolute, and admitted no exceptions.

He conducts his business with unwavering precision. If a law has been broken then there is a price to pay, whoever the culprit:

He would have arrested his own father escaping from prison and denounced his mother for breaking parole, and he would have done it with a glow of conscious rectitude.

His personal life matches his zeal for justice. He has complete integrity so that, when he thinks he has overstepped the mark with a superior, his immediate response is to offer his resignation. He never lies.

Javert is often portrayed as being on a personal quest to capture Valjean. This is incorrect and is to give him an emotional edge that is simply not there. He is totally dispassionate. When their paths cross, he is on Valjean's trail like a bloodhound. At other times, however, he is absorbed in fighting crime elsewhere.

We are offered a man who is both simple and complex. Javert is someone who should be a hero. He is missing just one thing yet that one thing is sufficient for him to be turned from hero to villain. He lacks the inner spark of love and mercy that would give him a perspective beyond the letter of the law. He is, in short, a Pharisee, blind to the deeper things of God and misinterpreting the salvation of God in others.

Week 1 - Day 3

Read Matthew 25:31-40

Early in the month of October, 1815, about an hour before sunset, a man who was travelling on foot entered the little town of Digne. ... It was difficult to encounter a wayfarer of more wretched appearance. He was a man of medium stature, thickset and robust, in the prime of life. He might have been forty-six or forty-eight years old. A cap with a drooping leather visor partly concealed his face, burned and tanned by sun and wind, and dripping with perspiration. His shirt of coarse yellow linen, fastened at the neck by a small silver anchor, permitted a view of his hairy breast: he had a cravat twisted into a string; trousers of blue drilling, worn and threadbare, white on one knee and torn on the other; an old grey, tattered blouse, patched on one of the elbows with a bit of green cloth sewed on with twine; a tightly packed soldier knapsack, well buckled and perfectly new, on his back; an enormous, knotty stick in his hand; iron-shod shoes on his stockingless feet; a shaved head and a long beard.

Thus are we introduced to Jean Valjean, the central character of *Les Misérables*. His story is simple yet tragic. He is a victim with a capital V. He is born into a peasant family and, whilst young, loses both of his parents. He is brought up by his only surviving sister, an older sister. When her husband dies, Valjean reluctantly assumes the role of breadwinner for the family earning what money he can and working until he drops. We are told, poignantly, that he has never been in love. The story gets worse:

In pruning season he earned eighteen sous a day; then he hired out as a hay-maker, as laborer, as neat-herd on a farm, as a drudge. He did whatever he could. His sister worked also but what could she do with seven little children? It was a sad group enveloped in misery, which was being gradually annihilated. A very hard winter came. Jean had no work. The family had no bread. No bread literally. Seven children!

One Sunday evening, Maubert Isabeau, the baker on the Church Square at Faverolles, was preparing to go to bed, when he heard a violent blow on the grated front of his shop. He arrived in time to see an arm passed through a hole made by a blow from a fist, through the grating and the glass. The arm seized a loaf of bread and carried it off.

The thief was Jean Valjean who is sentenced to five years hard labor. Four times he tries to escape from prison and because of this his initial five-year sentence is extended bit by bit to nineteen years. Eventually he is released, the man we have met walking into Digne in 1815. Two decades of imprisonment have taken their toll. *From year to year this soul had dried away slowly, but with fatal sureness. When the heart is dry, the eye is dry. On his departure from the galleys it had been nineteen years since he had shed a tear.*

Brutalized, he has withdrawn into himself and silently rages against the system that has treated him in this way. And society adds insult to injury. On Valjean's release he is captivated by the prospect of freedom but is quickly disillusioned. He has to carry

special yellow papers which mark him out as an ex-convict. He does a day's work unloading bales but, when the foreman sees the papers, he refuses to pay any more than half the agreed rate. Valjean fumes. This is no less a robbery than his stealing of the loaf.

In Digne he asks for food and lodging and is refused. He asks for a glass of water and is refused. He tries to sleep in a kennel and even the dog chases him away. He feels that everyone and everything is against him.

In that obscure and wan shadow within which he crawled, each time that he turned his neck and essayed to raise his glance, he perceived with terror, mingled with rage, a sort of frightful accumulation of things, collecting and mounting above him, beyond the range of his vision,-- laws, prejudices, men, and deeds,--whose outlines escaped him, whose mass terrified him, and which was nothing else than that prodigious pyramid which we call civilization.

Betrayed, by the English singer-songwriter Peter Hammill, is one of the gloomiest songs you will ever come across. I can't help feeling that Jean Valjean would have sympathized with its lyrics.

It speaks of setting out altruistically with plenty of hope and a faith in the goodness of humanity. This is dashed in discovering that humanity is, well, human and characterized by four base instincts – bitterness; pride; hatred and lust. Everyone, including friends, will take their opportunity to stab you in the back. This may stem from familiar roots such as revenge or spite or, more downright depressing, simply out of boredom and a lack of more interesting things to do. The bleak conclusion: *"I don't give a damn anymore - I've only wound up betrayed. ... I've nothing left to fight for except making my passion heard - I don't believe in anything, anywhere in the world"*.

How do we break through the chains of embitterment that encircle so many people? Jesus points us in the direction of selfless love. Nothing less will do. And, when we do step out of our comfort zone and reach out to others, we find that we are reaching out to Jesus.

Week 1 - Day 4

Read John 6:53-63

François Melchior Charles Bienvenu de Miollis was Bishop of the French town of Digne from 1805 to 1838. He was a larger than life character with a considerable reputation for charitable works and being on the side of the poor. Victor Hugo uses him as inspiration for the fictional bishop who proves the catalyst that launches Jean Valjean on a fresh journey through life. Bishop Miollis becomes Bishop Charles François Bienvenu Myriel.

In the musical version of *Les Misérables*, the Bishop comes and goes in just a few lines yet in the book he fills the first hundred pages. He is described to us thus, *There are men who toil at extracting gold; he toiled at the extraction of pity. Universal misery was his mine. The sadness which reigned everywhere was but an excuse for unfailing kindness. Love each other; he declared this to be complete, desired nothing further, and that was the whole of his doctrine.*

He is the living embodiment of Jesus Christ who literally overflows with love and whose door is never bolted day or night.

As for the Bishop, his thought can be found explained, or at least indicated, in the three lines which he wrote on the margin of a Bible, "This is the shade of difference: the door of the physician should never be shut, the door of the priest should always be open."

Myriel becomes Bishop of Digne in 1806 and moves into the bishop's palace with his unmarried sister and their housekeeper. The palace is next door to the tiny hospital where twenty-six beds are cramped into its few small rooms whilst the palace can sleep sixty. To the Bishop the solution is obvious. They swap.

His annual income as Bishop is 15,000 francs and his distribution of this money demonstrates his commitment to those in need:

<i>For the little seminary</i>	1500
<i>Society of the mission</i>	100
<i>For the Lazarists of Montdidier</i>	100
<i>Seminary for foreign missions in Paris</i>	200
<i>Congregation of the Holy Spirit</i>	150
<i>Religious establishments of the Holy Land</i>	100
<i>Charitable maternity societies</i>	300
<i>Extra, for that of Arles</i>	50
<i>Work for the amelioration of prisons</i>	400
<i>Work for the relief and delivery of prisoners</i>	500
<i>To liberate fathers of families incarcerated for debt</i>	1000
<i>Addition to the salary of the poor teachers of the diocese</i>	2000
<i>Public granary of the Hautes-Alpes</i>	100
<i>For the gratuitous instruction of poor girls</i>	1500
<i>For the poor</i>	6000
<i>My personal expenses</i>	<u>1000</u>
<i>Total</i>	<u>15000</u>

The personal expenses of 1000 francs, together with the sister's small annuity, means that the three live very simply on 1500 francs. Hoping for more income, Myriel's housekeeper reminds him that he can claim a further 3000 francs each year as a carriage allowance. The claim is duly made. The money is given to the poor and the Bishop continues to ride everywhere on horseback. The one luxury that Myriel allows himself to retain is his silverware – six sets of knives and forks, a soup ladle and two candlesticks.

Neither is his ministry restricted to the relief of poverty. He is also critical of its causes:

He was indulgent towards women and poor people, on whom the burden of human society rest. He said, "The faults of women, of children, of the feeble, the indigent, and the ignorant, are the fault of the husbands, the fathers, the masters, the strong, the rich, and the wise." He said, moreover, "Teach those who are ignorant as many things as possible; society is culpable, in that it does not afford instruction gratis; it is responsible for the night which it produces. This soul is full of shadow; sin is therein committed. The guilty one is not the person who has committed the sin, but the person who has created the shadow." It will be perceived that he had a peculiar manner of his own of judging things: I suspect that he obtained it from the Gospel.

The Bishop is an old man and his area of responsibility is a mountainous region difficult to negotiate on horseback. Neither of these factors prevents him from fulfilling his pastoral duties.

He was at home in the peasant's hut and in the mountains. He could expound great matters in the simplest terms, and speaking all tongues could find his way to all hearts.

On one occasion, he is advised not to travel into bandit country. His philosophy ...
"Let us never fear robbers nor murderers. Those are dangers from without, petty dangers. Let us fear ourselves. Prejudices are the real robbers; vices are the real murderers. The great dangers lie within ourselves. What matters it what threatens our head or our purse! Let us think only of that which threatens our soul."

He makes the journey and returns with valuables previously stolen from the cathedral. His only uncertainty is whether they should be returned to the cathedral or given to the hospital.

The word disciple is the English translation of the Greek word μαθητής (mathetes) which means one who learns from another. A disciple of a master was one who learned principles from that person and put them into practice. Jesus, however, states that to be one of his followers we must take a further step. There will be no real life in us unless we make a complete identification with him. We must eat his flesh and drink his blood!

This is true discipleship and it is small wonder that people complained it was too hard! Yet, only by this can we expect to make an impact. And please note that any of us can make an impact. Too often we write ourselves off as being useless. We are too young or too old. We are untalented or uneducated. We are too timid or too impulsive. We dream up excuse after excuse but every single person with the tiniest piece of faith in their hearts is capable of moving mountains. In 1815 Bishop Myriel was seventy-five years old. Nobody would have begrudged him a quiet and peaceful retirement had he chosen it but Bishop Myriel was still living and breathing Jesus and would do so until he died. As a result, Jesus was able to use him to restore Jean Valjean – and he will use you too.

If you are looking for a cozy philosophy by which to live your life then you do not need Jesus. If you are looking to change the world in Jesus' name then read on.

Week 1 - Day 5

Read Luke 19:1-10

It is time for Valjean and the Bishop to meet. We left Valjean alone and dejected in the middle of Digne. There he meets a woman coming out of the cathedral who points him in the direction of the one door where he might find a welcome.

Meanwhile, in the Bishop's residence, word has arrived about the 'dangerous criminal' in the town. Myriel's housekeeper is urging that they should secure the house with locks and bolts when there comes a loud knocking at the door. Unperturbed by what might lie on the other side, the Bishop calls out, "Come in."

Valjean is made welcome. A meal is prepared for him and the table laid with the silverware, as it would be for an honored visitor. A bottle of wine is opened, wine reserved for guests as the Bishop classes it too expensive for his own needs. And Valjean is given a bed for the night, the first proper bed he has slept in for nineteen years.

Ironically, it is the comfort of the bed that wakes him at two in the morning. Prison has transformed him into something less than human and at this point his baser instincts take over. He has already reckoned the value of the silver cutlery as being twice what he earned from two decades in prison and he feels that society owes him with the church being a central prop of all that has rejected him. Consequently, he makes off with the cutlery. He does not get far and two policemen bring him back to the Bishop's house:

A singular and violent group made its appearance on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth man by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the other was Jean Valjean. ... "Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?" Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier of gendarmes, "so what this man said is true, then? We came across him. He was walking like a man who is running away. We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver--"

"And he told you," interposed the Bishop with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

"In that case," replied the brigadier, "we can let him go?" "Certainly," replied the Bishop. The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who recoiled.

"Is it true that I am to be released?" he said, in an almost inarticulate voice, and as though he were talking in his sleep.

"Yes, you're released; do you not understand?" said one of the gendarmes.

"My friend," resumed the Bishop, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean. The two women looked on without uttering a word, without a gesture, without a look which could disconcert the Bishop. Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

"Now," said the Bishop, "go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night."

Then, turning to the gendarmes:-- "You may retire, gentlemen." The gendarmes retired. Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting.

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice:-- "Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop had emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity:-- "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

Grace is a difficult word to define but here we have it expressed perfectly. Mercy is not being treated as one deserves when one has done wrong. Had the Bishop refused to press charges against Valjean it would have been merciful. Grace goes beyond that. Mercy wipes out a negative. Grace adds a positive. If mercy is not being punished as we deserve then grace is being given something we don't deserve. Grace is two candlesticks taken from a mantelpiece and given to a thief.

In Jesus' time to eat and drink with somebody was a sign that you had nothing against that person. That was one of the reasons why the Pharisees got upset when Jesus ate with 'sinners' because it looked as though he was approving of their actions. Zaccheus was a man who, like Valjean, was reviled by polite society. Why? Because he was a tax collector and tax collectors collaborated with the Roman occupiers, as well as having a notorious reputation for over-charging! Very few people would have accepted an invitation to one of his dinner parties and even fewer would have invited him to one of theirs. It was a life that would have left him well-hardened.

How do you warm the heart of a hard person? Not by giving them what they deserve but by giving them more than they deserve. That is grace. That was Jesus.

Week 1 - Day 6

Read Matthew 4:12-17

The Bishop had given Valjean the two silver candlesticks with the words that his soul was now bought for God but on their own those words have no meaning. If they did there would be no need for any of us to be praying for non-Christian family or friends. Instead, we could simply bring them into God's kingdom by our own actions. What we do may have a profound impact in the lives of other people but each of those people has to decide for themselves how they will respond and what future direction their lives will take.

As Jesus begins his ministry, he appropriates the words of the prophet Isaiah. Light is dawning where there had been only darkness and shadows. So it is with Valjean. The Bishop's kindness – the grace that had been shown to him – was beginning to penetrate the darkness of his mind.

What is the one further thing needed in order to respond to that light? Repent, says Jesus, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near. The Greek word used here is the word μετανοέω (metanoeo). It means, literally, to change one's mind. Where once we did the wrong thing, now we see the error of our ways and choose to do the right thing. It has been said that in Jesus' time the word would have been perfectly understood on a military parade ground. If the word μετανοέω were barked out, any soldier in earshot would perform a 180-degree turn and begin marching in the opposite direction. That too is exactly what the word means spiritually. It is to stop marching away from God and to begin running into his arms.

It is hard to think of the word repent without adding 'of your sins' but that is to undersell it. The emphasis is just as much, if not more, on what we are turning to rather than what we are turning from. We don't come to God because we have turned our back on sin. We turn our back on sin because we have chosen to turn to God.

Having left the Bishop, Valjean is in turmoil.

He was indistinctly conscious that the pardon of this priest was the greatest assault and the most formidable attack which had moved him yet; that his obduracy was finally settled if he resisted this clemency; that if he yielded, he should be obliged to renounce that hatred with which the actions of other men had filled his soul through so many years, and which pleased him...

So troubled is he that he enters a near trance-like state and when a small boy's coin rolls under his foot he instinctively covers it with his foot and seems not to notice the boy's cries. It is one further offence and one that is to have devastating consequences. As an ex-convict, any fresh offence will throw him back into prison. This is that offence. From now on, the threat of reincarceration will follow Valjean through the remainder of the book.

But when he finally realizes what he has done, it proves the key that is needed to unlock Valjean's spiritual life.

First of all, even before examining himself and reflecting, all bewildered, like one who seeks to save himself, he tried to find the child in order to return his money to him; then, when he recognized the fact that this was impossible, he halted in despair. At the moment when he exclaimed "I am a wretch!" he had just perceived what he was, and he was already separated from himself to such a degree, that he seemed to himself to be no longer anything more than a phantom, and as if he had, there before him in flesh and blood, the hideous galley-convict, Jean Valjean, cudgel in hand, his blouse on his hips, his knapsack filled with stolen objects on his back, with his resolute and gloomy visage, with his thoughts filled with abominable projects.

.....Thus he contemplated himself, so to speak, face to face, and at the same time, athwart this hallucination, he perceived in a mysterious depth a sort of light which he at first took for a torch. On scrutinizing this light which appeared to his conscience with more attention, he recognized the fact that it possessed a human form and that this torch was the Bishop.

His conscience weighed in turn these two men thus placed before it,-- the Bishop and Jean Valjean. Nothing less than the first was required to soften the second. By one of those singular effects, which are peculiar to this sort of ecstasies, in proportion as his reverie continued, as the Bishop grew great and resplendent in his eyes, so did Jean Valjean grow less and vanish. After a certain time he was no longer anything more than a shade. All at once he disappeared. The Bishop alone remained; he filled the whole soul of this wretched man with a magnificent radiance.

Jean Valjean wept for a long time. He wept burning tears, he sobbed with more weakness than a woman, with more fright than a child.

As he wept, daylight penetrated more and more clearly into his soul; an extraordinary light; a light at once ravishing and terrible. His past life, his first fault, his long expiation, his external brutishness, his internal hardness, his dismissal to liberty, rejoicing in manifold plans of vengeance, what had happened to him at the Bishop's, the last thing that he had done, that theft of forty sous from a child, a crime all the more cowardly, and all the more monstrous since it had come after the Bishop's pardon,--all this recurred to his mind and appeared clearly to him, but with a clearness which he had never hitherto witnessed. He examined his life, and it seemed horrible to him; his soul, and it seemed frightful to him. In the meantime a gentle light rested over this life and this soul. It seemed to him that he beheld Satan by the light of Paradise.

How many hours did he weep thus? What did he do after he had wept? Whither did he go! No one ever knew. The only thing which seems to be authenticated is that that same night the carrier who served Grenoble at that time, and who arrived at Digne about three o'clock in the morning, saw, as he traversed the street in which the Bishop's residence was situated, a man in the attitude of prayer, kneeling on the pavement in the shadow, in front of the door of Monseigneur Bienvenu.

Week 1 - Day 7

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

Keyword for the week : Grace

Setting the scene

Watch the DVD (14 minutes)

Start: Scene 1, the beginning of the movie

Finish: Valjean tears up his papers and throws the pieces into the air (13:45)

i 2 i

Issues to explore

What stood out for you from this week's readings or movie clip?

Was there anything you didn't understand?

Irritants

Was there anything in the material with which you disagreed?

The Day 6 Dilemma

The struggle that comes from being a person created in the image of God

The Bishop's actions provoked a great struggle in Valjean out of which came faith.

What was it that prompted Valjean to change?

What was pulling him in the opposite direction?

How might you have reacted in his situation?

Living it out

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:1-2)

How would you define the following phrases?

‘Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice’;

‘The pattern of this world’;

‘The renewing of your mind’.

Why do you think we cannot properly know God’s will without undergoing a transformation of our mind?

What do you think are the main things that stop a person from becoming a Christian?

How would you define grace? How can we live our lives so that God’s grace shines through us as it did the Bishop?

i 2 i

Insights

What insights have you gained from this week’s material?

Implementation

Did you resolve to change anything in your life? What steps do you need to take to achieve this?