

Third Sunday of Lent

Collect: Almighty God whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

1 Corinthians 1.18–25: For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2.13–22: The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Reflection:

As we continue through Lent the Gospel readings ask us to look ahead to the last days of Jesus’ life. Today, in the overturning of the tables of the money changers in the Temple, we find an event that almost certainly brought Jesus to the attention of those who would arrest him and put him on trial. Alongside it, John writes of Jesus as “the bread of life” and has Jesus’ words about being raised up in three days. A sign and statement of this is the act of defiance by Jesus when he challenges those who manipulate a devotion to cultic ritual in the part of the temple, where the tradition was that all people of genuine faith should be able to find a place of loving acceptance and respect.

On the day we remember Jesus overturning the tables I thought about the recent Radio Two listeners vote about favourite songs from musicals. The two songs with the most votes came from the musical of “Les Miserables” based on Victor Hugo’s nineteenth century novel.

This novel and the musical explore big themes about love and life and very explicitly religious faith. Jean Valjean’s journey; a poor man who is imprisoned for many years after stealing a loaf of bread and when released faces rejection by all. The transformation is when he is taken home and cared for by the Bishop of Digne, who also protects Valjean by denying to the police that Valjean had stolen his silver candlesticks. It is an act of graceful love by the Bishop which Valjean never forgot.

In the musical, Valjean sings of his never-ending road to calvary, and this journey has at its heart forgiveness, grace, justice and reconciliation, and then ultimately in the book, Valjean's death is seen to be holy and peaceful.

Before then, on many occasions, he sacrifices personal interest for the good of others and, although at times physically and emotionally broken, he finds human love helps him overcome fear and injustice. By contrast, there is the morally righteous Javert who seeks without question to do his duty by following the letter of the law. His moral certainty is challenged on all fronts by Valjean, especially when Valjean spares his life.

And as well as all of this, we are caught up in the drama of the idealism, especially of the young, who, for the poor and oppressed, for the forgotten, are seeking to change things for the better. In the musical there is a beautiful song of lament to these young men and women, "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables".

And at this moment in the story, perhaps we really do ask where has God been in all of this?

Not to be found in the life of the morally self-righteous Javert and not to be found in the leaders of the sort of society that imprisons the majority of the people to fear, poverty, discrimination and death. That Victor Hugo was recognised and so loved because of his powerful articulation of such big questions on behalf of the forgotten, would be fully acknowledged at his funeral, when over 2 million people lined the streets of Paris. And today almost every town and village in France has a Rue Victor Hugo.

In thinking about those big questions today, over 100 years later, a quotation from a more recent voice on the themes of Hugo's great work. It is from the autobiography "No Easy Walk to Freedom" by Nelson Mandela, who like Valjean, was a prisoner for many years:

"It was during those long years in prison that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people... I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness...

When I walked out of prison that was my mission, to liberate oppressed and oppressor both. ...For to be free is not merely to cast off one's own chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning."

In the Gospels we find Jesus challenging the temple authorities and his action is accompanied with teaching that opens out a way of freedom and liberation both to the oppressed and the oppressor. In the end Jesus will be handed over to be crucified, but we find that his life has changed at least two people who were part of those who were amongst his oppressors, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. They will represent in the tomorrow that is coming, those from amongst a powerful elite whose chains have been cast off and whose own long road to freedom has begun.

(The 2012 film of the musical Les Miserables is available on DVD)