



Another Story Must Begin-Virtual Lent Course 2020

Rev. Matthew Gough



A recap so far-

We are using the 2012 Les Miserables musical film based on Victor Hugo's epic novel and the Lent study guide by Jonathan Meyer's, 'Another Story Must Begin'.

The title is taken from Jean Valjean's words when he throws away his parole card taking a new identity after his meeting with the Bishop of Digne. Les Mis has several gritty and dark themes yet running through these is a story of redemption and grace as well as flawed righteousness and selfishness.

Each week had a focus on a theme or character with several questions helping us to explore the overarching key themes-how grace can change us

-mercy versus Justice

-the need to turn to God

-our responsibilities to our neighbor, particularly the impoverished



Session 1-Fantine and Cossette (separated impoverished mother and daughter)

We sat together for this one. The questions and accompanying scriptures were challenging and theologically deep. Some found this stimulating, others, overwhelming. I admit, I too was surprised at the challenge of the questions which are not maintained in future weeks-as the course progresses, it becomes more straightforward. I like to think of this week as a scoping to appreciate the landscape as critical questions get asked about poverty, justice, salvation and righteousness before God.

Isaiah 58, 1-12-how are we neglecting or upholding God's intentions for justice?

Genesis 1: 26-27-how we are made in the image of God, our dignity comes from this

1 Corinthians 30-how can any of us be righteous in God's eyes.

Rev 21, 1-5-the biblical vision of heaven is different to what most of us understand?

In summary-all are lost, broken and separated from God. The poor and destitute or no worse that you or I, we are all sinners in some way. The point of Christ's death is salvation for all-we cannot be righteous. Christ is righteous and thus faith in him gives salvation, not our own merit or morality. To some extent Fantine and Cossette represent all our common humanity. There is nothing they can do for their condition. Cossette's life is rescued by Valjean intervening like a Christ like savior.



Session 2 – Bishop of Digne (Kind Priest)

The story is pivotal on the encounter between the Bishop and Jean Valjean. Without the intervention of the Bishop, there would be no story. He transforms the life of Jean Valjean. The backstory of the Bishop is not evident in the screenplay. However, the novel shows the Bishop's own journey from an unsympathetic conservative character concerned with the preservation of church order and tradition. He resents the revolution as being anti-God, but he has his own transformational conversion when challenged by an atheist about how little the church cares for the poor.

In the film you see the tensions in the looks between the housekeepers to the Bishop when he gives away the silver of the church. A question poses itself-how much is it the value of the silver, or the validation by the Bishop of Valjean being loved by God that transforms his life?

How much do we see Christ in the Bishop?

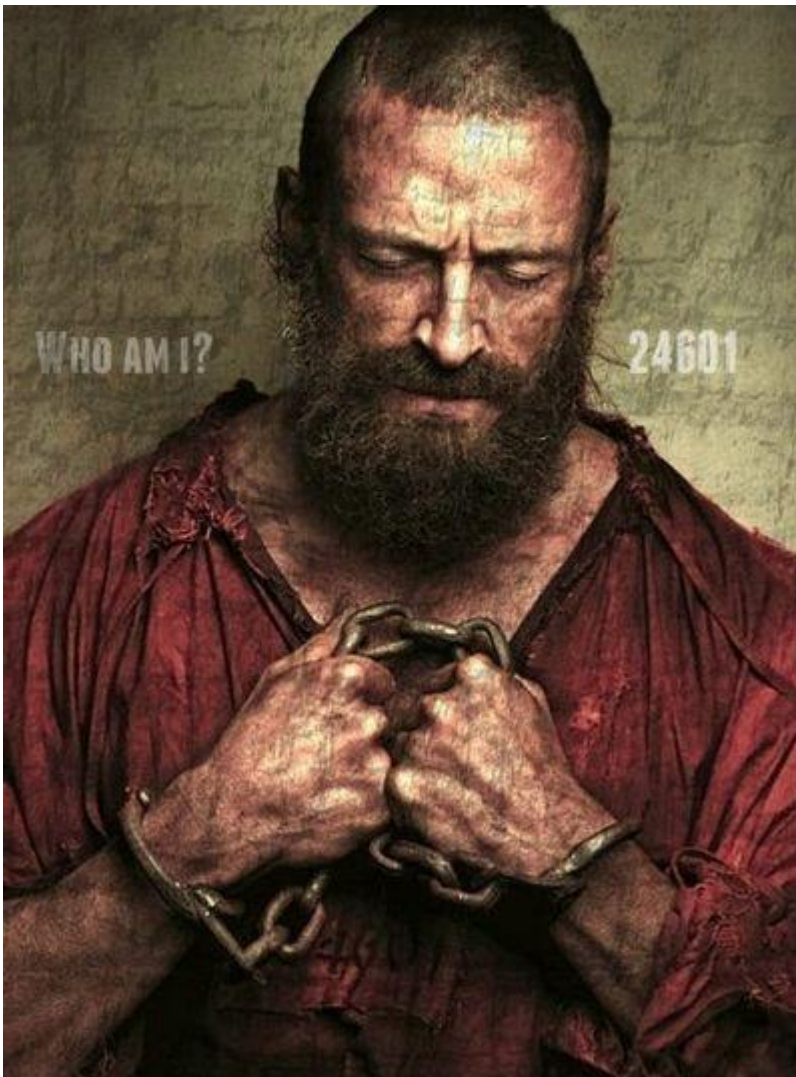
Could we be that generous with our own possessions? With those of the church?

Read Luke 10:25-37.

What is the role of the church for those in need?

Is that practical?

Read John 1:4,5-what does it mean to be raised out of darkness? What ways are we called to share the gospel to those who do not know the light of Christ?



Session 3-Jean Valjean (Convict Mayor)

The degradation of Valjean's humanity is total in the opening scenes. When we look down as per the song- what does it say about ourselves and how far we are from God's intention? Consider this against the suffering humiliation of the exiles in Isaiah 51: 22/23. We see something of the juxtaposing of being cast down and lifted up with the transformation of Saul to Paul- Acts 26: 12-18.

Note how Valjean is assaulted by the Bishop's grace. Are our hearts soft or hard to grace? Do we need God to soften our hearts?

Consider which has greatest impact-the gift of silver or the gift of forgiveness.

Valjean's life is wholly transformed by the time we catch up with him as mayor and yet he is still human and flawed. Can you see weaknesses in his otherwise saintly demeanor? How hands off was he in his workshop? Consider the tension he feels with the mistaken capture of another convict.

In John 18:15-18, 25-27, we see Peter betraying Christ out of fear. We can understand Valjean's dilemma, though he does the right thing ultimately.

In our faith life, we face struggles-what may this tell us about our faith, yourself and your heart?

Read John 21: 15-19 consider how completely Jesus restores and forgives Peter, how this is similar to Valjean's redemption and what it may mean in terms of good news for you and me.



Session 4- Javert

Javert has long been recognized as one of literature's finest baddies. He is so compelling because he is not diabolical at all, rather his misguided sense of justice so understandable and human ultimately is his undoing.

Notice in the hospital fight scene how he explains his upbringing. Does this help us understand his rigid adherence to duty and justice? Ultimately such inflexibility, though it has brought him career success and recognition, duty has become idolatrous. Despite him believing himself to serve God, his narrow focus on upholding law means that his moral compass is distorted to the point of destruction.

How does his sense of justice conflict with Valjean's?

Consider Psalm 1-do you have sympathy with Javert's sense of righteousness (and wickedness)?

How about his sentiment that those who falter, and fall should pay the price?

Contrast his inner turmoil when shown compassion and released by Valjean to when Valjean is set free from the soldiers by the Bishop. How differently have they responded?

Read Romans 3 21-26. What does Javert's approach have to say about this?

What parallels are there between the Pharisees whom Jesus challenges and Javert?

Genesis 3 tells us we are dust (and to dust we shall return) and we use this in the Lenten ashing service. How helpful is it to recognize this quality?

How are you moved by the God of grace and your understanding of sin and righteousness?



Final session (5)-Redemption & Salvation

There is much about 'homecoming' towards the end of the film. Note the lyrics about Marius, but it also a cry from Valjean to release Cosette. Then Valjean himself is welcomed home in his death where he is shown amongst all those who have died on the barricades.

Jesus's parable of the Lost Son is the best biblical narrative on homecoming. Read Luke 15 11-32. Notice the forgiveness in the film towards Marius from his grandfather. Can you see similarities and differences with the Luke parable?

We say in communion, "whilst we were a far way off, you met us in your son and brought us home". Can you see Valjean once again Christ like in his rescue of Marius-in the dirt and sewers despite mass personal risk-a holy love to bring him home.

The film asks the question which we should all ask of ourselves at Lent, 'Who am I?'

For a new story to begin in our lives we need to ask ourselves, 'who am I?'

Final Prayer

From Meyer's Lent Study book

Closing prayers

Heavenly Father, Almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for our time together this Lent. We pray that we may have been moved by reflecting on the story of Jean Valjean.

Give us grace to examine our own lives.

Give us grace to show and manifest the love you have shown to us in the life of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Bring home all those who are 'far off'; grant that as you meet us you may reach out and meet them.

Bring home all those who are divided from your love.

Grant that we may truly see your face in those around us.

Grant that those who hate may be turned to love, that we will live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord.

Grant us redemption and salvation through your heavenly grace. Amen.