



25th September 2022
1 Timothy 1.12-17
Luke 15.1-10

I was treated mercifully...

Minister: Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word.

All: **So in his name we pray
and for his voice we listen. Amen.**

In *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo incorporates an inspirational bishop at the centre of the story. Unlike the recent film adaptation of Jane Austin's *Persuasion* which airbrushed out all references to church and clergy, both the stage and film versions of *Les Mis* have kept the bishop in the limelight.

Jean Val Jean has been released from the prison hulks on parole. He is welcomed into the bishop's home to spend the night, much to the housekeeper's disgust. Sure enough, by morning he has gone AWOL along with two silver candlesticks. Once apprehended, and dragged back to the house, the police ask this bishop if he wishes to press charges. Looking at Jean Val Jean he speaks up for him, saying the candlesticks were a gift so, no, there would be no charges.

It was a moment of mercy. One that horrified the housekeeper, mystified the policeman, yet one that totally changed the life of Jean Val Jean for the better. That moment of mercy opened up a new life for him and he walked through it gratefully.

No, there's no story in *Les Mis* without the mercy of the bishop. And mercy is today's theme, found predominantly in our epistle and alluded to in the gospel.

We are not too sure who wrote 1 and 2 Timothy, along Titus. Traditionally attributed to Paul, yet linguists nowadays say the style in the original bears no relation to the other letters written by him. So, maybe they were written by *The School of Paul*. By some of his followers trying to carry on his legacy.

Nevertheless, either as author or subject the story of Paul, and his call by God still loom large in today's reading.

The letter to Timothy is really a challenge to false teachers. These are people deemed by Paul and his followers as spreading a corrupted, and corrupting, version of the message of Jesus.

Yet, it's interesting to see how this rebuke to such false teachers is made. It's not done as stridently as we might have expected. The author uses the technique of saying there was a time in his own life when he got things wrong, yet he changed his mind, his views and his

beliefs. So now he's longing, in a merciful rather than judgemental way, that these false teachers will also change their minds, and embrace apostolic orthodoxy.

It's in this appeal to the false teachers that Paul is described as one who has, himself, been *dealt with mercifully*. And like Jean Val Jean, that, for him, was a transformative experience.

As a religious leader and campaigner Paul, then known as Saul, displayed extremist tendencies; ones replicated a thousand times since in any age. He is not averse to using violence to advance his goals. He describes himself as intolerant of the views of others. And he stands on status so much, using his personal power abusively towards those with whom he disagreed. Saul was feared. His reputation went far and wide as an enforcer of a particular way of believing. And in those days, he used violence not words to make his point.

Whenever our religious beliefs lead us to violence, intolerance and abuse we have surely lost the plot or any right to a hearing.

Yet, says the author of 1 Timothy, it was exactly at this moment in Saul's life that he receives the mercy of God. It gave him a new life and a new name, and from this point on Paul spoke words of love and laid aside actions of hate.

Maybe mercy gets a bad name. After all it can be thought of as being weak. Why forgive? Why listen to a person's backstory? Why give someone yet another chance? Isn't that being morally soft?

Or we think of mercy when, in truth it's anything but. Think of those perfectly reasonable requests made by surfs to an all-powerful Lord or King in mediaeval days. The embattled villager would '*throw themselves on their master's mercy*'. When, looked at through our eyes, their request was their right and never really a matter of mercy in the first place. We're grateful that times have changed.

I think the idea of biblical mercy is both comforting and challenging. It's one we'll spend a lifetime exploring, sometimes as its giver and often as its receiver.

Yet it can make all the difference and become a central understanding to us about what faith in God looks and feels like.

In believing that God is truly merciful towards us, looks upon us with generosity and kindness, and calls us to look upon others in a similar way, we begin to see how 'full stops' can become merely 'commas' in life's journey.

I suspect that everyone of us in church this morning can recall a time in our lives when we really felt we had messed up, perhaps even enough for a relationship to come to an end or a phase of life to be shut down. Yet the way someone else treated us, with a loving kindness that we probably didn't deserve, well that merciful way of treating us could have postponed, or even abolished the finality we were so dreading. So, to our joy and relief, the relationship continued or that phase of life became just one chapter of many. The full stop became a comma.

Life without mercy can be very bleak. And we seem to be in an age when that way of thinking comes from some surprising quarters.

It used to be thought that The Church was the most puritanical of organisations, yet today perhaps the most severe and intolerant judgements actually come online through Social Media.

Young people increasingly say they live in fear of being 'cancelled' by their friends if they express an individual thought outside of the 'group think' of their peers. Ideas such as sexuality and gender are rightly debated these days with a deeper understanding and a willingness to look at things differently, and we in the Church need to be willingly and generously involved in that process. Yet, in the Social Media world in which many of our children or grand children live what seems at first like liberal tolerance all too quickly becomes group think intolerance if a member of the WhatsApp group offers a different or nuanced view to the others. Reports in the news have recently told us that such people are now regularly and instantly 'cancelled'. No mercy is shown, no debate is had, instead just one view is tolerated. It's what I call *Intolerant Tolerance*.

The same can be true in our society about Trial by Tabloid. We're beginning to lose the wise concept of *innocent until proven guilty* and replaced it with the idea there's never any smoke without fire, so what the newspapers say must be true.

I find myself longing for a world where we make up our minds more slowly before rushing to judgement. One in which we don't consign people to feel failures forever because they have messed up, but who can live in a world where redemption and mercy is possible.

Perhaps that's why I love Faber's hymn with these two verses:

But the love of God is broader

*Than the measure of our minds.
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

*And we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own
and we magnify God's strictness
With a zeal he will not own.*

The *wideness of God's mercy* is more than hinted at in our Gospel reading today all about the one who searches for the lost sheep and keeps on looking for the lost coin. Of course, it's picture language, but maybe some would have given up, concentrating on the ninety-nine still in the fold or just grateful for the change left in the purse and not lost in a dark corner.

But not this searcher, not this God. This is a picture of a pro-active God, always looking out for us, always ready with the offer of mercy and renewal, always wanting us to re-join the fold, come out of a dark corner, or be welcomed home.

In the life of Jesus, we glimpse something of the character of God and during his final

days, crushed by betrayal and denial Jesus offered mercy. On the cross he asks God to forgive those who drove in the nails because *they know not what they do*. And after the resurrection Jesus looks with mercy upon Peter and his betrayal, picking him up and restoring him, offering him new beginnings. And just maybe, if Judas hadn't have taken matters into his own hands, he too would have found in Jesus a mercy that would have been wonderfully kind.

None of this would have been easy. Life is messy and we all mess up. Yet Jesus shows us the way.

I don't know about you, but I love the part Ananias of Damascus plays in the conversion of St Paul. Imagine the scene in Straight Street, Damascus the day they met. This firebrand Paul, infamous for his violence against Christians, has arrived in town a changed man, or so he says. But what sort of reception would he have? Ananias is the first on the scene and offers mercy. It took such great courage, don't you think, to meet your greatest opponent and believe his story, so much so that you greet him with the warm and merciful words of *Brother Saul*.

I think it's one of the most inspiring moments of the New Testament, Ananias's welcome of Paul.

It seems as if he baptised him and then spent about a year instructing him in the Faith. Yet it all began with a word of mercy and a greeting of love. A full stop became a comma, and a whole new chapter opened up in the life of Paul.

Mercy makes for a kinder world and promotes thousands of small resurrections in everyday life. It doesn't deny justice or excuse wrong. Yet as The Truth and Reconciliation Commission taught the world, through listening to each other's stories and glimpsing another person's reality, through witnessing their pain and seeing the consequences of a shattered life, there can, and did come, hundreds of moments when mercy met confession, resulting in a mutual redemption and new beginning. It was messy, it was pain-filled, and yet as Desmond Tutu is chairman said: *Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin. Without forgiveness there is no future.*

Forgive me for ending with a story I've told before from this pulpit. Of course, if you've been here for the last ten years and listened to every sermon, and I note with some sympathy for you that today's is sermon number 351, then I'm pretty sure you won't have remember every word!

Rachel's father was a headmaster and one day he was returning to school after a meeting off site and ran into a student in the newsagents, buying some cigarettes, who shouldn't have been there. A tricky moment! My father-in-law took the initiative that showed a lifetime of experience and said to the boy playing truant, *I've got the car, why don't I give you a lift back to school, if we hurry we can make the first bell after lunch.*

Words of mercy – and probably the best lesson that student ever learnt.

May God's mercy continue to bless our lives, and may we, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, be merciful in our words and actions to others. Amen.