

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

September 27th 2020

Reformed by His merciful Image

The Collect for today's Mass, that is, the prayer that collects the theme for the Liturgy begins this way:

“O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow we pray, your grace abundantly upon us.”

God's power is displayed in our lives as we see the image of his merciful love in the face of Jesus. When this happens our lives can undergo a transformation where we are reformed by His merciful image as we experience his abundant grace.

It is this theme, “reformed by His merciful image” that I want to think about with you today as we discover in the readings the power of God's merciful love. These texts declare God's deep desire to pardon and show mercy to us.

However, before we get to the readings I want to share with you a vivid depiction of the mercy of God displayed in the novel, *Les Miserables*

Those of you who have seen the musical, either live, or the film, may remember that scene where Jean Valjean is apprehended by the gendarmes, because he has made off with the local bishop's silverware. Upon bringing Valjean to the bishop so he can confirm the theft, the bishop says to the suspect in the hearing of the officers:

“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?”

As the gendarmes leave, once assured by the bishop of Valjean's innocence, the Bishop then pronounces these merciful words:

“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.”

As the novel unfolds this encounter will, over time, result in Jean Valjean's realization that he does belong to the good because in the Bishop he saw the image of the merciful Jesus and thereby began the long but real work of reform.

The reading from Ezekiel captures what Victor Hugo will develop throughout the novel - the wicked Jean Valjean turning away from his wickedness so that he can discover the life that

mercy imparts to him. For as Ezekiel so clearly declares when we turn to the Lord his mercy can cover all the transgressions we have committed.

As we come to know more deeply the mercy of Jesus that can reform us we are to ponder the words from Philippians where Paul counsels that we are to look not to our own interests but to the interests of others. By doing so we will be forming the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus that who in the form of God, he took the form of a slave, being found, says Paul, in human likeness. It is this mind that is on display in the bishop who emptied his home of the last remnant of his family's wealth in order to bless Jean Valjean.

And here is the heart of what I am saying today. Changing our minds is the key that opens the door to the kingdom.

Whether we identify with the first son, and our hearts rebel against God's requests or the second son, and we try to fool ourselves by wearing the mask of an obedient child, the Lord and St Paul are pleading with us to change our minds and follow the example of emptying ourselves of either open or concealed rebellion.

With the first son we may need the Holy Spirit to lead us to greater generosity in meeting the needs of others. We are invited by St Paul to meditate on the Lord's self-emptying and pray that by letting Christ live his life in us, we may positively influence the hearts of others, just as the Bishop's generosity melted the heart of Jean Valjean. So too spending time with the Lord in Eucharistic adoration can give us ears to hear the voice of our self-emptying Lord. I would invite you to find time to come on Fridays to adoration from 10 AM – 12 PM, if your schedule allows, or to spend time in the Church during the day before the Tabernacle.

Or with the second son, we may need to ask the Lord to empty us of our self-satisfaction. Do we think that pious words hide acts of selfishness from God? The Lord is inviting us all into his company. Spending time examining our conscience in prayer can prepare us to meet the Lord through confession where we can drop our masks of hollow piety and accept our dependence on him. He longs to give us the grace to live a truly generous, luminous life.

When this happens we can indeed be reformed by the Lord's merciful image so that instead of playing the part of Jean Valjean we can learn to say and sing the bishop's lines. In the original London Show Colm Wilkenson plays the role of Jean Valjean. In the 2012 film he plays the part of the Bishop. Such is the work of God in our lives so that art can indeed be true to life.

After leaving the Bishop Jean Valjean spends the night in deep introspection and prayer. Victor Hugo describes in radiant prose how his main character begins to be reformed by the merciful image of the Bishop:

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. 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.

It is this work beloved brothers and sister that Jesus desires to effect in each of our lives so that as our Collect affirms the bestowing of his abundant grace, we can then go on to pray that you “O God would assist us in hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasure of heaven”.

This is what Jean Valjean discovered and so I ask what about you? For you see, when we learn to live knowing Jesus’ merciful image we can sing those lines that make up the first stanza of today’s psalm:

***Make me to know your ways O Lord;
Teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me.
For you are the God of my salvation***