

### Homily for March 18 2017

Some of you may be familiar with the opening to Les Miserables where we meet Jean Valjean. He is an ex-convict who has just been released from nineteen years in prison for stealing bread to feed his sister's children. As he re-enters society, no one will house him or give him work because of his criminal record – that is until he stumbles into the bishop's house. Much to Valjean's bewilderment, the bishop treats him with kindness and hospitality. Seizing the moment, Valjean steals the bishop's silver plates and, then, flees into the night.

The bishop's reaction to Valjean's treachery is not what we might expect. Instead of being angry and offering condemnation, the bishop examines his own behavior and finds himself lacking in charity. "I have for a long time wrongfully withheld this silver; it belonged to the poor. Who was this man? A poor man evidently," he reasons to himself. So when the police arrive with the captured Valjean, the bishop's silver in his possession, the bishop calmly greets the thief and says, "But I gave you the candlesticks also ... why did you not take them along with the plates?" The police, surprised and confused, reluctantly let the thief go.

In our reading from Micah there is this arresting sentence: "God delights in showing clemency". What does clemency look like? It looks like the genuine care the bishop shows to Jean Valjean. What does clemency look like? It looks like the welcome the father gives to his wayward son when welcoming him home with open arms.

What is a definition for clemency? It is mildness or gentleness shown in exercise of authority," and comes from Latin clementia "calmness, gentleness," from clemens "calm, mild. Mildness and gentleness in the exercise of authority.

Micah, says that God delights in showing clemency. Or as St Thomas Aquinas put it; God shows his omnipotence primarily by exercising mercy, which is a synonym for clemency. It is the unfolding clemency's meaning that is on display in the last three verses of our Micah reading and in our parable.

Listen to each verse in turn:

Verse 18 celebrates God's forgiving love:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over transgression  
for the remnant of his inheritance?  
He does not retain his anger for ever  
because he delights in clemency.

Verse 19 celebrates his redeeming power:

19 He will again have compassion upon us,  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.

