## 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 life 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.

And verse 20, God's perpetual faithfulness.

You will show faithfulness to Jacob and mercy to

Abraham,

as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

Forgiving love, redeeming power, and perpetual faithfulness are the three aspects of God's mercy as taught by Jesus in the Parable of the Waiting Father and his Two Sons.

We see in the Father this steadfast patience that is waiting and waiting for the son's return. The Father's forgiving love, his delighting in clemency, is expressed by Jesus in these words:

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Filled with compassion find tangible expression with an embrace and kiss. Here is the forgiving love of God passing over transgression and delighting in clemency.

We see the redeeming power of the father's love when he commands:

Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The robe and ring are symbols of the son's true identity. The meal about to be enjoyed is the table of redemption and belonging. Redemption is best described as a celebration where God does tread our iniquities underfoot and casts our sins into the depths of the sea.

Forgiving love, redeeming power and thirdly perpetual faithfulness, as so warmly expressed in these words spoken to the older son:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found

All that is mine is yours and you are always with me. Sadly, this son had missed it all. He could not see in his father one who is perpetually faithful. Rather he resented his father's clemency, expressed by forgiving love and redeeming power. The father is willing to experience the older son's resentment because he can never renege on his perpetual faithfulness. We had to celebrate and rejoice... because this is who I am. I delight in clemency.

May we allow these readings to stimulate our thoughts and prayers as we give thanks to the Father for his forgiving love, redeeming power and perpetual faithfulness. May we display in our own lives qualities of clemency that reflect the same.