

COMPASSION FROM GOD AND FOR EACH OTHER

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 3 March 2019**

During January, the Sunday evening prime slot on BBC One was *Les Misérables*. A wonderful adaptation of Victor Hugo's powerful epic. Fabulous costumes, dramatic scenes, amazing sets showing the grim reality of life in France 200 years ago. It's perfect TV for me. I know the musical pretty much word for word, so it did take a while to get to use to the characters not singing.

The two central characters are Jean Valjean and Policeman Javert. Jean Valjean is a convict who rebuilds his life after 19 years in a slave-labour prison. Despite the cruel injustice of imprisonment, Jean Valjean learns about forgiveness and compassion. His heart softens and he learns to love by adopting an orphan girl. He becomes a deeply kind and compassionate man.

Javert on the other hand is a rigid disciplinarian. He sees the world in black and white, good and evil, with no room for compassion. In his eyes, Jean Valjean is bad and always will be.

Over several decades their paths cross a number of times. Eventually they come to face to face with Inspector Javert captured by revolutionaries. Jean Valjean arrives and volunteers to deal with Javert. The suggestion is he will kill him and finally be rid of the obsessed policeman who has hunted him all these years. Instead, Jean Valjean releases Javert. Javert expects Valjean to stab him with the knife in his hand. Instead he cuts the ropes and sets him free. This act of compassion shatters Javert's world view. For him the world is divided between black and white, right and wrong, the righteous and the sinner. He is unable to understand Valjean's act of compassion and mercy. Javert never recovers for the resulting personal turmoil.

Lent begins on Wednesday. What world view does Lent arouse in you? For many Christians, Lent reinforces a faith of dualities: right/wrong, sin/righteousness, discipline/indulgence. With a few days still to go, I encourage you to approach Lent with a sense of compassion and mercy – an awareness that it's ok to be kind to yourself because God is kind to you.

For some of us, being kind to ourselves does mean breaking a habit that is damaging. Resetting our lives in that way is life-giving. But just giving up something out of a vague sense that we should be self-disciplined is not so good, especially if underneath is a lurking self-doubt or lack of self-worth. Whatever you have planned for Lent, giving up or taking up, may it deepen your awareness of God's compassion and mercy.

Lent of course begins with the ashing of Ash Wednesday. A powerful reminder that we depend on God's grace. A dramatic expression of our mortality: "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return". Our lives are short, life is precious, there are things that is worth spending time on and other things that are a waste of the little time we have. Deepening our compassion, strengthening our capacity for forgiveness are things worth giving our energy to. In that way we bring to the fore in our lives, the divine compassion and mercy that lies within us as we are transformed into the image of God.

Mortality, compassion and forgiveness are forces that connect us all at the deepest level. We are in the middle of a season of death and dying in the Cathedral community. Already this year several dear friends have died: Edward Steele, John Marsh, Annette Tibble, Peter Rowland, Pat Ribbins. The names on our prayer list of people who have died is unusually long at the moment, including people who are significant to various of us. And other beloved ones are seriously ill at the end of their lives. It is always true that "in the midst of life we are in death". Sometimes this truth is more evident than usual.

What are we to say about these things? There's a common view that leading funerals regularly must be tough going for clergy. Leading a funeral is a great privilege. A funeral of someone I know and care about is deeply moving. Grief affects us all. But in fact, leading funerals regularly is great gift. In a culture that tries to keep death at arm's length, it is a gift to be regularly reminded of our mortality. It is a gift that is healthy and life-giving. It is a gift to give thanks for and to celebrate. Funerals express that mysterious mix of deep truths: pain and grief, yes; the reality that we are fragile; and thankfulness for a life, however long, however it ended. And for me, a reminder that grief is something which connects us all. Sooner or later in our lives, grief visits us through the death of someone we love deeply. As life goes on, as we get older, grief visits us regularly. Grief is the price we pay for love.

But do not be downhearted, dear Friends. Grief binds us together. It is a common experience we can share with each other. Grief and mortality encourage compassion for each other. Many times I have witnessed people in church communities look beyond their differences, look beyond any bitterness and guilt, and express compassion and kindness in the face of death and bereavement.

It is a privilege too for clergy to witness the flood of compassion between family, friends and neighbours when someone is gravely ill, and the compassion and love shared with a husband, a wife, a partner who is waiting for what must happen. Our beloved friend Richard Bentley would give a thumbs up to this. The love and kindness he inspires is wonderful, even as his physical condition deteriorates yet further. Penny depends on the kindness and compassion of family and friends. Similarly, Liz Steele too gladly acknowledges how our support and love have sustained her through Edward's long illness and death. "One of the great mysteries of Christianity is that suffering lifts the veil that separates us from one another."¹

It is important to be honest about the challenges, the strain, the heartbreak, the pain of serious illness. But that is the nature of our lives and we can't change the reality of our fragility and mortality. What we can do is notice, encourage, deepen and celebrate the compassion within each of us, within all of us, within every human being.

This morning's Gospel reading is the mysterious story of the Transfiguration. A strange story that speaks of another dimension revealing itself. Like the resurrection, the transfiguration shows us that our limited, earthbound lives are part of God's greater reality. Which is why we need not be downhearted with all this talk of death and dying. "What are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."² God is for us. God who is compassion, mercy, kindness, love – the loving presence, the positive energy, the life-giving Force behind everything.

This week, on Wednesday, the church remembered George Herbert, the great poet and Anglican priest. As Lent approaches, it is always worth recalling Herbert's poem "Love". There is no better expression of God's compassion and mercy in the English language.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,

¹ Barbara Lazear Ascher in *A Cloud of Witnesses – 20th Century Martyrs* ed Susan Bergman p.319

² Romans 8.30ff

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.
'A guest,' I answered, 'worthy to be here.'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.'
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'
'Truth Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat:'
So I did sit and eat.

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