

Redemptive love

By Judy Taylor



I don't know about any of you but I have found that at my age, whenever a birthday or Christmas comes around and family ask what I would like, I find it very hard to suggest anything. I totally accept that this is a very blessed position to be in so when my birthday came round in May I was faced with this "happy" dilemma. I remembered how much I had loved seeing the London production of "Les Misérables or Les Mis" as it's become known. My son pounced on this and said he would get tickets so last week I met him, his wife and my granddaughter in London to see this wonderful show.

So what is it about the story and images in "Les Mis" that have captivated and mesmerized readers and audiences around the world? The CS Lewis Institute states that three biblical themes stand out above the rest: 1. The disarming power of hospitality given in the name of Jesus Christ. 2. God's offer of grace to the undeserving and 3. The Spirit's redemptive power as demonstrated through the transformed lives of those who follow Christ.

The backdrop for Les Mis is the French Revolution and the years following—one of the most tempestuous and violent periods in French history. Hugo's own preface describes this age as having three serious problems, "the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night."

The story begins as Jean Valjean is released from prison having served 19 years hard labour for stealing bread to feed his family. His antagonist the police inspector Javert reminds him he will always be a felon and he will pursue him for ever. Valjean tries to find work but he is rejected because of his time in prison. This just adds to his bitterness of his unjust sentence so in desperation he knocks on the door of a bishop whose French name means welcome and he does indeed welcome him offering food, bread and wine a bed to sleep in and kindness, something poor Valjean has not experienced for many years. When he questions the bishop's hospitality he says "you need not tell me who you are, this is not my house it is the house of Christ. You are suffering, you are hungry and thirsty be welcome... Your name is my brother". This act of hospitality reflects the love that Jesus has for all who are miserable and suffering and no matter how low they have fallen within the values of society, they have dignity and worth and should be recognized and treated with respect.

When Valjean awakes in the morning he sees the silver tableware and the temptation is too much; he steals it and makes off. When the housekeeper discovers the theft she calls the police and soon Valjean is arrested and taken back to the bishop's house. The bishop says "are there you are, I'm glad you came back, I gave you these candlesticks too, why did you not take them with the rest of the silver I gave you?" As the police leave the bishop gently tells Valjean that by giving the candlesticks to him, a broken man you must now use this precious silver to become an honest man. God has raised you out of darkness; I have bought your soul for God.

In the musical he finally falls down in prayer and sings "Sweet Jesus, what have I done? I feel my shame inside me like a knife. He told me that I have a soul. How does he know? What spirit came to move my life? ...I stare into the void, to the whirlpool of my sin. I'll escape now from the world... Another story must begin!" Jean Valjean has been born again.

God has redeemed the hard-hearted criminal Jean Valjean. The word redeemed means "to buy back" and Valjean's life has been bought back or purchased by God. He has

been the recipient of God's hospitality through the bread and wine served by the priest who acknowledged his dignity and worth as a human being. He has experienced God's grace through the light of the candlesticks and he has now been raised up, a redeemed follower of Christ. From this point on in Victor Hugo's story, we see in dramatic fashion the influence, impact and power of his transformed life as he sacrificially shares the light of Christ with others.

At the end of Jean Valjean's life we can see that he has learned the truth spoken by another John, that "God is love", the candlesticks shine brightly around his face as he sings "God on high, hear my prayer. Take me now to thy care. Bring me home.. Forgive me my trespasses and take me to your glory" Valjean is at peace with God.

The music and the words of the song reveal to the audience, if just for an instant the hope that awaits all who put their trust in Christ.

Sometimes we experience something we cannot put our finger on or explain what has just happened to us but I believe that the return to this show by thousands of people time and time again is that they experience something that is so profound it draws them back to answer something deep inside in them; a yearning, a longing perhaps to let this story speak to their hearts and to give them hope in this broken world.

"Le Mis" has been playing in London and on Broadway longer than any other musical to packed audiences at every performance. It is something to experience, it never fails to affect me on so many levels, it is unique.