

Lent Course: On-line Option: Another Story Must Begin

Week 1: This section looks at the mother, Fantine, exploited by power because of her poverty, and at the daughter, Cosette, who continues to dream her dreams. We are asked to look at the current realities of poverty, and at how far poverty dictates behaviour or at least shapes people's moral choices. We are also asked to look at dreaming despite circumstances: does it make things possible or is it just wishful thinking. We reflect, privately, on our own bad choices, their effects, and on moving on. What are your dreams for a better world – perhaps for children or grandchildren?

Week Two: This section looks at the bishop, who rejects the wealth and status symbols that often went with being a 19th Century French bishop; and in time softened his rather rigid and judgmental attitude to "others" and to "Church good"/ "anything else bad". In first offering hospitality and then offering forgiveness to Jean Valjean that he changes this man's life. He offers love not judgement.

To think about: It is how we live our lives outside church that is important. "I have accepted the isolation of hatred, hating no one." We need to live our lives according to love, not according to rules.

Week Three: This section looks at the film's/book's hero, Jean Valjean. He spent years in the galleys for stealing a crust of bread for someone else; sacrificed his hard-won new position in society rather than let someone else take the blame for what he had done; and risked his life to save the man who was taking Cosette's loyalties away from him.

To think about: Are we any good at letting conscience take precedence over self-interest? Is there any value in praying for something when we are unwilling to do anything (however small) to achieve that thing? "It is gaol that makes the gaol bird."

Week Four: This section looks at Javert, the policeman whose origins are not unlike those of his enemy Jean Valjean, but who is dedicated to law (however unjust) and order (however unfair). He kills himself when he discovers that he is at odds with his own rigid understanding of justice. (Jean Valjean throws away his golden opportunity to kill his arch enemy and pursuer, and Javert can't handle this.)

To think about: Can we live easily with the knowledge/suspicion that infallibility is not always infallible, that dogma can be erroneous, that anarchy not order might descend from heaven? Cardinal Newman (who, oddly, left the caution of Canterbury for the certainties of

Rome) said: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often". When "laws" are broken, do we see forgiveness as weak or as divine?

Week Five (Redemption and Salvation): How do you feel about fundamentalism – Christian fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, Atheist fundamentalism? We are right, absolutely right, and everyone else is wrong, absolutely and fatally wrong. When a criminal who has done dreadful things is sentenced, are you in the "throw away the key" lobby? Could you; like Jo Berry, sit side by side with Paddy Magee who killed her MP father in the Eastbourne hotel bombing? Is "hell" empty, or very full?

Closing thought: *"When we were still far off, you met us in your Son, and brought us home".*