

Human Face of Divine Love (part 2) Week Beginning April 13th

With all its passion and power, its beauty, pain and pathos, *Les Misérables* truly reveals another face of God. It uniquely expresses, according to Rev. Dr Ian Bradley, 'the central Christian message of

the redemptive power of forgiveness and sacrificial love'. Theologian Karl Rahner calls this way of seeing things 'the mysticism of life'. All our lives and loves are the work of God in the human heart. God's revealed face is always specific and tangible; it is an enfleshing, an embodiment to be endured and enjoyed, reaching its fullness in one vulnerable human being called Jesus. God materialises in human form – the only form in which God's love can be experienced.

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Into the three hours of the film so much of human life is compressed – the terrible despair of inspector Javert and the aching loss of the mother and prostitute Fantine; the heroic self-sacrifice of the reformed Jean Valjean, culminating in the costly, beautiful blessing he bestowed on the bruised and blossoming love of Cosette and Marius; the youthful heroism of Enjolras, Eponine and Gavroche and the deaths they died for freedom; the unscrupulous gracelessness of the Thénardiens.

Incarnation reveals the divine energy in all such human aspirations towards fulfilment.

But where is God in the terrible suffering, deception and cruelty at the core of the film? Jesus spoke of the divine presence in the criminals, prostitutes, drunkards and tax collectors of his time (Mt. 25). So we believe that he embraced and actually became the hopeless lives of those urchins and prostitutes, the utter degradation and humiliation of once-beautiful bodies, the corruption and destruction of once-brilliant minds. Our wretchedly-human God still looks out from these ravaged faces in the rat-infested backstreets of Paris – or any other city. Can this be true?

Where can the real presence and promise of the divine be physically and mentally experienced if not in the dark labyrinths of human hearts? What is the stream of human desire that runs through the film but God's incarnate saving grace transforming that hell into hope? And where else can there be the slightest evidence that God is an effective, invincible power healing humanity at its most desperate, most diabolic and most despairing, other than in the raw reality of our complicated, ambiguous and beautiful lives? Every day of his life, Pope Francis will be reminding us of this resisted revelation. '*Les Misérables*', '*The Wretched*' – they have also dreamed a dream. They carry a relentless belief in the breaking of 'the chains of slavery'. The exultant strains of 'the music of a people who are climbing to the light', who are singing of those 'chains (that) will never bind you' in that 'new world about to dawn' sounds like a kind of secular Exultet, a redemption song of the people.

This vision of Catholic Christianity, though still not integrated into its full theology of incarnation, may be its most important contribution to universal awareness today. The freedom and the flourishing of humanity and of the world are the deepest desire of both Christianity and secularism. Human love and endeavour are brought to completion in God's heart. And they come together in the elegant theological line 'To love another person is to see the face of God'; dare we call it a kind of mini-credo of the Christian faith?

Beyond enjoying it as a moving film, watching *Les Misérables* through the 3D of Christian revelation is a moment of utter grace and wonder. Contemplation in a cinema.

(from '*Treasured and Transformed*', published March 2014)