

**15th Sunday of OT 2019**  
**Fr Jonathan Jong**

Deuteronomy 30.10-14

Colossians 1.15-20

Luke 10.25-37

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Despite the erudition of the company I keep and my own more common fondness for musical theatre, I have somehow managed to avoid knowing anything about the 650,000 word Victor Hugo novel *Les Misérables*, the adaptation of which is the longest-running musical in the West End. That is, until last Wednesday: it is my wife's favourite musical, and so I took her before the Queen's Theatre in London closed for refurbishments. As we were leaving the theatre, she asked me what I thought, and I expressed my surprise at how thoroughly *Christian* it was. Hugo might not have approved of this description: or perhaps he would have done, with the caveat that it is more Christian than the Church often is.

To risk being too reductive, it is a story about choices: the choices to do good or harm, and the difficulties of making them. Jean Valjean, an ex-convict and our protagonist, is dragged by the police to the Bishop's house, whose silver he has stolen: and the Bishop chooses to lie in order to save the man. Had he been truthful—honesty being the best policy, and all that—Valjean would have been thrown back into prison. Years later, Valjean—now a wealthy factory owner and mayor, albeit under an assumed identity—discovers that someone else is about to be wrongly condemned for his crimes: and he chooses to come clean, despite the convenience for himself of this mistake. Éponine—the daughter of unrepentant crooks—is in love with Marius, who has fallen for Cosette at first sight: and time and time again, she chooses to help them find each other. Javert—a policeman who has been chasing Valjean for years—has the opportunity to finally arrest him, but can no longer bring himself to do so: instead of violating his allegiance to the law, he chooses death in the Seine. And so it goes.

The fine line that the story tries to tread is that between mitigating circumstances and situational determinism. Valjean should not be vilified for stealing

bread; nor Fantine for turning to prostitution; nor even Javert for his merciless legalism, nor even Éponine's parents for being craven opportunists. At the same time, however, fatalism is roundly rejected: there are choices to be made, and we can make the right ones despite the social and political forces that pull us this way or that.

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Having spent the better part of 30 chapters calling Israel to covenant with God and providing in minute detail what that entails, the Deuteronomist now seems to feel the need encourage. Their encouragement is twofold. The first appears just before the section we have just heard, and is perhaps the more familiar to Christians: Israel is assured that there is return from exile, forgiveness for failure; repentance and reconciliation are possible when they are required. And then there is this bit of optimism that sits uncomfortably with the typical Christian assertion that divine grace is required for salvation because we are congenitally unable to pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps: *this commandment is not too hard for you, neither is it far off; the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you*

*can do it*. In other words, fatalism—and the cynicism that often follows—is roundly rejected, which is not to say that pollyannish naïveté is embraced. After all, the first bit of encouragement would scarce be needed if moral perfection were easily within grasp. The point is not that we will always make the right choices, but that we *can*.

And the choice put before Israel—and, by extension, by adoption, before us—is a,s the Deuteronomist proceeds to say, to choose *life*: over death, blessing over curse. Choose life: which, even so culturally obtuse resident of these isles as I would recognise from John Hodge’s screenplay of Irvine Welsh’s tragic novel *Trainspotting*, incidentally also a story about choices, though only superficially so. The choice between heroin and sobriety, is—in the worldview of the story—not very much more than the choice between two forms of futility. The choice to abandon the glorious highs and miserable lows of addiction for the bland steadiness and security of middle class existence is, in many ways, a good one but not without qualification. In the film’s final litany, Renton the main character describes the life he has chosen: job and family, TV and taxes, golf and game shows, “clearing the gutters, getting by, looking ahead, to the day you die.”

Christians are, in case there is any doubt, not called to choose this kind of life, in which we just get by, looking ahead to the day we die.

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Which brings us finally to the story of the good Samaritan, that most unpreachable of texts. It is not so much that *Les Mis* reminds us of Jesus's most famous parable: it is more than that just is the parable of the Good Samaritan told and retold, the story of people choosing to reach across categories, break boundaries, self-interest and *bourgeois* respectability cast into the wind. The bishop and the ex-convict; the mayor and the prostitute; the unrequited lover and her beloved; the revolutionary and the spy who is out for his blood. Over and over again: the Samaritan and the Jew.

Who is my neighbour? asks the lawyer, and Jesus does not tell him because neighbours are not recognised, they are made, which is to say that they are chosen as all making is choosing too. There is no list for us from on high, demarcating neighbour from not: no neatly defined categories for us to identify friend and foe, kin, kith, and stranger, because identification is, like recognition, the wrong verb altogether. People,

according to the gospel, are not for categorising but for loving.

Which of these *proved* neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" is Jesus's challenge to the lawyer. Which one made a neighbour that day of a stranger, a friend that day of a foe? Which one put mercy before manners, compassion before categories? That guy—the Samaritan, the one we think of as *other* even if we do not quite admit that we think of them as *inferior*—is the one who proves neighbourly, who becomes neighbour, who makes neighbours of those who despise him or are at least suspicious of him.

We should not let the rhetorical force of this role reversal escape us. The point is not just that the lawyer should have mercy upon Samaritans, it is that he should be like the Samaritan. Samaritans are not unilaterally to be pitied and passive recipients of Jewish charity: they are to be seen as moral agents too, who make choices, and whose choices we may well need to emulate. Be like him, Jesus is saying to his interlocutor: be like the one you, just a moment ago, sneakily tried to escape from loving.

So it is with us, and whoever our Samaritans are, whatever are the more or less arbitrary categories we have constructed, with which we have fenced ourselves off from others, from loving. Choose life *together*: choose to make neighbours, choose to break boundaries, choose to run roughshod on the prejudices we have inherited, choose to see the good and admirable in those we have been predisposed to view with suspicion. Such choices are possible: they are not too hard for you, for us, for God's sake and by God's grace. So, choose: go, do.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**