

# **Treasured and Transformed**



































## *Human Face of Divine Love*

*We need all the help we can get from the world's artists to get glimpses into what we mean by Incarnation, by the revelation that God's presence can be detected in everything and everybody, that there is a sheen and a shimmering of divinity in the most ordinary moments of our lives. There are special films that open our hearts to that revelation.*



One wintry evening I went to see *Les Miserables*. I had heard about its spiritual power, its contrasting images of God, its compelling emotional resonance within the human soul. In particular, the words 'To love another person is to see the face of God' from the final song of the film seem to reverberate at ever-deeper levels in many hearts. People sense a profound truth in these words without quite knowing why. They hint at the unsuspected and astonishing closeness between the human and the divine, between heaven and earth.

To say 'I love you' to someone, some spiritual writers believe, is like saying 'Rejoice that your name is written in heaven' (Lk 10:20). In these earthly graces we experience the presence and promise of God. We are sacraments for each other, carriers of divinity, radiant with God's incarnate

being. Such is the power of human love in *Les Mis*. Archbishop Emeritus George Carey believes that some moments in the film's story of the misery and ecstasy of human life contain 'the finest description of grace outside the pages of the New Testament'.

St John Chrysostom wrote that 'Whatever unlocks the human heart, unlocks the heart of God as well.' St Augustine said that 'The love with which we love each other is the same love as that with which God loves us.' When costly, enduring love emerges between people something new and beautiful is created. Every healing that love brings to a lost soul is a sacramental event. In all the aspirations of the human spirit another face of God is revealed. This is incarnate Spirit in time, place, flesh and free will.

The mystery of faith, correctly understood, reveals that creation, evolution and all the capacities of humanity for death and life are revealed as embraced, healed and transformed from within by the God of Jesus. The whole heart-wrenching story of *Les Misérables* with its extremes of tragedy, ignominy and despair, with its searing emotion and passion, its human endurance in the face of utter loss, loneliness and longing, is, in faith and fact, the incarnate presence of the Christian God.

There is no longer any competition between the world and God, between the secular and the sacred. The evolving planet Earth itself is, in fact, the body of God made visible. We no longer look up to the heavens for God; we now explore more deeply the human realities of our daily lives. Sacramental moments of intimacy with God are strewn all around us. These are the daily places of revelation. But we must dig deeply to divine the hidden spring, to mine the immortal diamond. 'What makes a thing sacred or profane,' writes Richard Rohr OFM, 'is precisely whether we live on the surface of things or not.'

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. Think, then, of the characters in *Les Misérables* and their roles, personalities, dreams, sins and shadows.

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.