

Over the last few weeks here in Church we have been following the story of Jacob and his sons. It is the sort of story full of human drama, there has been intrigue, deceit as Jacob managed to get his brother Esau's birthright by deceiving his elderly father Isaac. Then we have the story of Jacob being palmed off with Leah when the girl he really wanted was Rachel. We heard of Jacob fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau – and let's face it you can understand Esau's point of view. Jacob, we are told, ended up with a large family, twelve sons in all. With that sort of background we can hardly be surprised that there were tensions between the brothers. Joseph, we are told, was his father's favourite and he lavished all sorts of gifts and favours on him. Joseph perhaps was not the most sensitive of children as he related his dreams and the significance of those dreams to his older brothers – dreaming of twelve sheaves in the field and yours bowed down to mine. Then last week we read the story of Joseph's brothers selling him as a slave and then taking his blood stained coat back to their father with the news that Joseph had been attacked and killed by wild animals. As they used to say of 'The News of the World' all human life is there.

It is against the background of all of this that we come to read our Old Testament Lesson this morning, as the brothers and Joseph meet up. In our story, Joseph now has the power to do whatever he wants; the brothers are totally powerless before this Egyptian official whom they do not recognise as they come seeking for help. Here is a chance for Joseph to get his own back – let the brothers know what it is like to be thrown into jail, to be treated like dirt. What we have instead in this story is an amazing act of mercy and forgiveness that enables a new start to be made between Joseph and his brothers.

With that in mind, let us have a look at this film clip. It is from the film 'Les Misérables' based on the book by Victor Hugo. The central character Jean Valjean has recently been released from over 20 years in prison where he had

been held for stealing bread to feed his starving sister. He arrives in the town of Digne. No inn keeper will take him in and he finds refuge in the house of Bishop Myriel.

*Film Clip*

It is another story of new starts made possible by the forgiveness of another. The question is what do we do with that new start. Does Jean Valjean just look on the Bishop as a silly old fool and does he just continue to live as an embittered ex convict with a chip on his shoulder.

This story of Joseph, the clip we have watched from ‘Les Miserables’ leave me facing an important truth as well as a profound question for myself. The first is to recognise that an act of forgiveness, an act of mercy such as we have seen is not an act of weakness, is not the easy option – it can be an act of real courage. In this regard I often think back on the reaction of the late Gordon Wilson to the death of his daughter in an IRA bomb in Enniskillen when he said he was not interested in revenge, rather he was praying for the men who had done this. That initiative had a long lasting impact in Northern Ireland. The question I find myself asking is ‘What do we do with this?’ What do we do with the teaching of Jesus and his life, death and resurrection? Do we see his call to forgive as a nice idea but life does not work like that? Or do we begin to act, to organise our lives and relationships in our homes, among our brothers and sister, among our friends, in our neighbourhood as if we really believed that what Jesus taught is as true now as ever it was, that the Bishop in our clip was not a silly old fool, that what Joseph did that day opened whole new possibilities for his family and people – that in our own small way our own obedience to God can make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us.