

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 11th October 2020

These past months have been so frightening for us all. We have been living in such a strange environment, and life has been far from normal. Never for a moment did we anticipate when we were ushering in 2020, that we would be confronted by such an horrendous scenario that has been devastating not only to the UK, but in every country beneath the sun.

Plans that you had fell through.

Anxiety and worry about others, about the economy, about the future have been uppermost in your mind.

Suddenly the life you were living wasn't the life that you had been dreaming of and hoping for and you found yourself in a place you never expected to be.

Life has often a way of killing your dreams.

You set out with high hopes, with plans and aspirations and expectations for the future, and then, without warning, they crumble to dust, and you are left to pick up the pieces.

In that wonderful production of "Les Misérables" which I have enjoyed watching on the Westend Stage, and more recently, in the superb production staged in our own Gaiety Theatre by the pupils of Wellington School in Ayr, one of Victor Hugo's characters, a young woman called Fantine, sings a powerful song as she finds herself in a hopeless place.

A summer love has left her alone with a child.

She finds work in a factory, but has to place her daughter, Cosette, in the keeping of some cruel and crooked innkeepers.

When it is discovered that Fantine has had this child and she is unmarried, she is thrown out of the factory and into the streets.

She is forced to sell her hair, then her teeth, then her body, in order to pay for Cosette's care.

She is falsely accused of a crime, and placed under arrest.

And on top of all of this, she is desperately ill.

And out of that dark place, she sings that wonderful song,

"I dreamed a dream in time gone by

When hope was high

And life worth living;

I dreamed that love would never die

I dreamed that God would be forgiving;

I had a dream my life would be

So different from this hell I'm living,

So different now, from what it seemed,

Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.”

Hopefully, none of us are in quite that desperate kind of place this morning, but we all have dreams that haven't come true.

We all find ourselves in places we never expected to be.

We know how it feels to be so low, so discouraged, feeling that all hope is gone.

Now, if it is not true for you right now, I am sure that it is probably true for someone you know, and maybe indeed, for someone you love.

Some of you may know the name of Viktor Frankl. He survived years in the Nazi concentration camps, and as the years went by, he noticed that many prisoners died just after Christmas.

They were hoping they would be free by then.

When they weren't, they gave. They lost hope. Their dreams of liberty died.

He learned that as long as prisoners had something to live for, a reason to press on, they could endure just about anything.

But once they lost hope, they quickly died.

The Russian novelist, Dostoevsky said that “to live without hope is to cease to live.”

Hope is essential for us all.

Hope that something or someone can change the trajectory of our lives.

And for the Christian, hope is the confidence that God can and will do something good.

Whatever circumstances you are coping with today – the attendant anxieties which Covid 19 has brought, the fracturing of a special relationship, disappointment, sadness, the Bible tells us that God can do something good with it, or in it.

When Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* in late nineteenth century France, he was writing to expose what he called the three great evils of his time – poverty; the exploitation of women and children, and spiritual darkness.

And he pulled no punches.

Fantine ends up dying of her illness.

But somebody is there.

Jean Valjean takes Cosette into his protection; he brings her up, and years later he delivers her into the arms of a fine young man.

And a Valjean dies at the end of a long and good life, Fantine's spirit returns to usher him into heaven.

The musical ends in a great reunion of all the characters, singing about a new and a better day.

“Will you join in our crusade, will you be strong and stand with me? There's a future about to start when tomorrow comes.” It is a magnificent song of hope.

Victor Hugo was a Christian and he had a very hard time with the Church of his day, but he never lost hope that good would triumph over evil and that justice would be done and there was life and love beyond the grave.

For 200 years, his story has given the world hope, hope that is grounded in the existence of a good and gracious God.

When Hugo wrote this magnificent book in 1862, he was drawing attention to the hell that humans create on earth for those around them, but right through its pages, there is the light of hope and dreams of a better tomorrow.

Think of the priest who forgives Jean Valjean for stealing the silverware and tells the police that he had given the silverware to him.

Jean Valjean, a man imprisoned for many years because he stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving family, yet who lifts up a broken wagon to rescue a man when nobody else would help and who saves Fantine's daughter and who saves Mario at the Barricade; who forgives his enemy and nemesis, Javert.

Les Misérables is about the hell that humans create, but also about the heaven that is possible when folk go on dreaming and hoping in the darkness.

If you are in a tough place right now, don't lose your hope, your dreams.

If someone you know is dealing with disappointment or loss or fear, give them hope by listening to them, by being with them through their trying circumstances.

You and I can be the heaven to someone's hell.

A verse which gives me confidence as we deal with the hurdles that life presents, are words written by St Paul : "All things work together for good for them that love God."

"ALL things"let us hope in the God who is able to bring triumph from tragedy; victory from defeat, the God who brings the sunshine after the rain, spring after winter, and laughter after tears.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

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