

If you've ever read the book, or seen the film or the stage production of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, you may remember a scene near the beginning of the story where the central character narrowly escapes getting into a lot of trouble. Jean Valjean has recently been released from prison and is struggling to start a new life. Unable to find work, income or lodgings, he turns to the local bishop, who graciously offers him a room for the night. Valjean, seeing an opportunity, steals large quantities of silver from the Bishop's house and leaves, only to be quickly caught by the police. They can see what has happened, so they arrest him and take him, complete with his loot, back to the bishop. To their surprise, Bishop Myriel tells the police that he gave the silver to Valjean as a gift, and tells Valjean that he should really have taken the candlesticks as well. After the police have left, the bishop forgives Valjean and says that he must use the silver to start a new and honest life. This incredible act of mercy gives Valjean a new start, a new future: it gives him hope. It gives hope not only because Valjean has "got away with it", but also because he now understands that his life is valuable to someone, and it is valuable to God.

Mercy opens the door to a new future: it can restore relationships, heal wounds, allow someone the possibility of genuine change. God, of course, knows this: the gift of God's mercy, and our duty to be merciful, are at the very heart of the Gospel. We could even say that the Gospel *is* mercy: everything in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord is a sign and a vehicle of the mercy of God. This mercy is necessary because of our human flaws, our weakness, our sin. As humans, we had turned away from God, but – as St Paul teaches today – the gift of redemption greatly outweighed the fall. In response to our sin, God sent a Saviour who came not only to forgive, but to give us a glory greater than we had at creation. His response to our sin is not to condemn or punish us, but to give us more, to love us more. Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more. Not without reason, the Exultet which is proclaimed at the Easter Vigil sings of the "happy fault", the "necessary sin of Adam... which gained for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer".

St Paul makes another important point about sin today: he says that everyone sinned, that "sin reigned over all" even before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. These people did not break the Law, Paul says, because the Law had not yet been given by God. But they still sinned. The point may seem subtle, but it's important, because it shows us clearly that sin is not simply a matter of breaking the Law or failing to follow the commandments of God: sin is any act which distances us from the God of love. Even if, on the outside, we keep every commandment to the letter, if we distance our hearts from God, we sin: we turn from Him, and so cut ourselves off from the source of life.

That's why St Paul reminds us that sin and death are linked. When we turn from the Lord, we turn from the One who gives us life. Death is not a punishment for sin; it's a consequence of it. And every sin brings a kind of death: who really feels alive and well when their heart is consumed with anger, jealousy, greed, or any other sinful desire? Who feels at peace when they know that their words or actions have hurt another person? God wants us

to avoid sin, because He desires that we have life: here and now, to have the joy of being truly alive, and in eternity, the life of eternal and perfect happiness in His presence.

It's strange how we so often resist this. It's always tempting to think that it's *my way* that will make me happy. As long as all my desires are fulfilled, I will be complete. Time and again we feel this, and time and again experience proves us wrong. But we are slow to learn! So we resist when we think God is asking something too difficult of us.

Perhaps because it seems too demanding, people have always resisted the Gospel and at more or less every stage in the Church's history, some of the followers of Jesus have been persecuted for their faith. Jesus knew that this would happen, and in today's Gospel encourages His disciples not to be afraid. There are some who will seek to kill the body, He warns, but that is all they can do. They cannot take away the life that God offers: life which continues long after our bodies have run their course. In the midst of this warning about persecution, the Lord offers us a beautiful teaching about how valuable we are to God. "Not one sparrow falls from the sky without your Father knowing it," He tells us, "and you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows!" "Every hair on your head has been counted", Jesus tells us. Why would anyone do that? I don't even care exactly how many hairs there are on my head! But God does. Because He loves me more than I love myself. He cares about my future, my salvation, even more than I care for these gifts. He loves me with a love which surpasses my capacity to love – even to love myself. That is the meaning of this teaching. It's very beautiful and it can be a valuable source of reflection and prayer for us.

The precise number of hairs on my head is a very unimportant part of my life. Yet God has counted them. I can be sure, then – we can all be sure – that there is no part of our lives that does not interest God. However small, however insignificant some aspect of my life may seem to me or to anyone else, God is interested. There are two things we can take from this. Firstly, it means that we can bring before God anything at all that troubles us or excites us, anything which occupies us, even if no one else in the world can understand why it's important. However small or insignificant it is in the great scheme of things, it matters to Him and we should take it to Him in prayer. Secondly, it means that in every aspect of life I should seek to please Him: not just in the big decisions or the great acts of my life, but in every small action, every seemingly insignificant word, every passing thought. In all things, great and small, I should seek to be a person of love. Everything in my life is important to God.

If being faithful to God in even the smallest aspects of life seems like quite a task, let's remember Paul's teaching: the gift outweighs the fall. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. God's mercy is great, and being a Christian is not about trying harder so much as being open to grace: it means opening our hearts to the abundant mercy of God and the grace He offers us to help us grow. He is a God of tireless mercy and inexhaustible grace. Let us turn to Him and receive from Him, He who is the source of all life and goodness.

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