**3rd February 2013**

**Genesis 12**

I went to see the new film version of Les Miserables on Friday. For the uninitiated, *Les Misérables* tells the tale of Jean Valjean (Hugh Jackman), a man in 19th century France who spends 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving children. We meet him as he is being released, under the watchful eye of the doggedly law-abiding officer Javert (Russell Crowe). Valjean soon realizes he is shunned by society, as well as by any potential employers. Destitute and desperate, Valjean only finds kindness from a humble bishop who offers him food and lodging, and an amazing act of mercy that changes the course of Valjean's life.

Following the bishop's challenge to make an honest life for himself, Valjean breaks his parole, changes his name, and becomes a respected mayor and factory owner. There he meets Fantine, a woman whose life he unintentionally destroys, a fact he tries to make up for by agreeing to care for her long-lost child. But then Javert shows up, eventually recognizes Valjean, and hunts him down to bring him to justice for breaking parole. Thus begins a life of fear and love for Valjean—living on the run while caring for the young girl, Cosette. Then the Paris uprising begins and things get even more interesting and complicated and heart-breaking.

Victor Hugo's story is a masterfully crafted tale of law and grace, love and loss, sacrifice and redemption. It is deeply spiritual, emotionally charged, and morally challenging. the film does a decent job of capturing these sweeping themes.

As a Christian, I have always been drawn to the portrayal of faith in *Les Misérables*. The bishop displays a Christ-like mercy to Valjean that literally transforms him. He emerges from that church figuratively born again, with a new identity and an entirely new course in life. And we see this transformed life touch others in need with compelling grace and love. This is all in sharp contrast to the character of Javert, a man of the law. He shows no mercy, and when mercy is eventually shown to him, instead of being transformed he is undone. Wonderful discussions could stem from these two characters alone. And I love that there are such beautifully faith-inspired characters in a film today.

At the end of the film, nearly the entire cast is singing perhaps my favorite line from both the musical and the book—"To love another person is to see the face of God".

Victor Hugo, himself a devout Christian, left a great legacy to bless us with in this book. I pray the film will bring blessing to all who see it.

You often get commentators talking about the legacy of outgoing prime ministers or presidents. What record of achievements will they leave behind that will make people remember them as people who ‘made a difference’ in significant positive ways. Sometimes this concern can skew their work and actually imperil their legacy.

God promises to bless Abraham and to make his name great. God will ensure he has a legacy. God has surely done so because there are few people better known in world history than Abraham. He is the person who demonstrates the basic nature of the relationship with God that God invites us into. Paul calls him the father of all believers (Romans 4.11).

The story of Abraham comes just after the story of the Tower of Babel – where the people of the plain of Shinar wanted to make a name for themselves but went about it in the wrong way – full of pride and self-concern and in the end it was self-defeating.

In making Abraham a great nation and making his name great, God will ‘bless’ Abraham. Blessing is an important theme in Genesis. We tend to think of blessing to be primarily spiritual and concerning our relationship with God. Jesus idea of blessing is both spiritual and material: he talks of inheriting the earth or the country and having hunger satisfied. In Genesis, God’s blessing started with the material and here it continues that way.

The idea of blessing and curse has run through Genesis so far. There are blessings for animals and humanity, the Sabbath. But then the snake is cursed and Cain himself. Noah is blessed but his grandson is cursed. When you get to the end of chapter 11 it’s a bit like a TV soap opera – it ends on a cliff-hanger. You not sure which way it will go – blessing or cursing?

Fortunately you get the answer in chapter 12. God wants to bless humanity. ‘I will bless you’ says God to Abraham. God has not abandoned the desire and commitment to bless. God will not only bless Abraham but through him humanity as a whole.

Genesis provides another illustration of a characteristic feature of God’s work in the world, taking hold of some people in order to make them a blessing to other people. Genesis has told us nothing about Abraham that indicates he deserves to be singled out to be the recipient of God’s blessing. Abraham is not being blessed because he deserves it! God made promises to Abraham before he did anything to merit God’s approval. That Paul’s argument in Romans about faith and salvation. It is unmerited. We do nothing to deserve it.

The end of chapter 12 reveals a different side to Abraham. He makes the move that God required of him but then things don’t go well. There is a famine. They get desperate and Abram takes off to Egypt with his wife Sarah. But being a nomad is a risky thing in those times when there was no law and order. At the Egyptian border he realises that he has an attractive wife who other men will want and they will kill him to have her. So to save his own neck he tells a lie that Sarah is his sister (she is actually his half-sister – so you could say he was being economical with the truth). Pharaoh’s men see her, like her and she joins Pharaoh’s harem until Pharaoh and his household get afflicted with some disease. The Bible doesn’t say what it is but it does attribute it to Sarah. Was it flu; was it a sexually transmitted disease? Who knows? The bible is discreet and economical with its words at this point – you have to fill in the blanks.

Likewise Genesis makes no comment on the rights or wrongs of Abraham’s action. Was it Ok for Abram to keep his family alive through famine by whatever means even if it meant pimping his wife? Should Sarah refuse to co-operate? (future chapters will show she develops a mind of her own after this). Genesis doesn’t draw any moral lessons about what is right and wrong. We are left with this messy story. Abram seesm to learn from it because by chapter 14 when offered the choice by the King of Sodom to give him his people and he can keep a lot of material goods, Abram refuses and says he has now made an oath ot God The bigger truth is that whatever Abram’s mistakes God’s purposes carry on. That should give us heart when we make mistakes that ultimately it doesn’t rest on us.

The great cry that comes from children when parents do something that the child doesn’t like is ‘it’s not fair’, especially when it involves privileging one child over another. Adults have usually not grown out of this reaction. The reply of the parent may in the end be tough’, which is roughly Paul’s response in Romans 9 when he argues why God chose the Jews and not anyone else to be the chosen people.

Paul offers the reason that God settles on some people rather than others not to exclude and privilege some but to include and bring blessing to all. That seems to be a characteristic feature of God’s work in the world. Someone has to do it – to bring the blessing.

Don’t ask me why? Why can’t God just shower everyone with the blessings? One result is that it binds us together as people and makes us indebted to one another.

Think of those who left you a spiritual legacy. Who shared with you the importance of faith? The people who are the reason you are here today. They left a legacy. They made a difference.

I suspect God working through ordinary people like Abraham was to bind together people who share in Abraham’s blessing. Not that it has worked too well: the three Abrahamic faiths Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not that good in being bound up together by a shared relationship to Abraham. But then that illustrates another point that God’s plans tend not to work out very well because humanity keeps messing them up. But it’s another blessing, the best blessing, that God doesn’t give up.

The church we believe is called to be God’s people. Called to be blessed – to know the assurance of God’s love and mercy. To live in that blessing. It is a privilege but also a responsibility. We have been blessed in order to bless the world around us.

Our mission statement puts it thus: called to be God’s people, transformed by the gospel, making a difference in the world.

In a moment we will be sharing in our church meeting where we are trying to make a difference, to share the blessings we have received. The practicalities about that are often niggley, brass tacks, small details, money, property, committees, discussions. It doesn’t seem like a blessing – more of a burden. Making a difference costs. Leaving a legacy costs.

Les Miserables tells the story of how Jean Valjean found grace and mercy and it transformed his life. He decided to live his life trying to help others and bless them in the same way he had been blessed. It wasn’t easy. But the story tells of the difference he made and what an inspiration it has been to readers, theatre goers, and now cinema goers.

May God help us to know how we have been blessed and how we can bless others.