

English is full of proverbs like - still waters run deep, beauty is only skin deep, looks can be deceptive, good things come in small packages. We learn quickly to distrust appearances, because too often they don't tell the whole story. Still, it's nice when the cover of a book is of the same wonderful quality as that of the story inside. I have some leather-bound, gold-embossed books I appreciate as much for their intelligent artful construction as for their inspiring character. So it is with today's gospel reading. John's memories of Jesus' first days of public ministry show a man called and destined to be nothing less than the incarnate Son of God who helps others find their identity and destiny as well.

The gospel of John is unlike any other biblical or extra-biblical writing. Since it has the most literary kinship with the synoptic gospels, in that it rehearses elements from the life and teachings of Jesus and forms part of the "gospel quartet" of the New Testament. But even a quick read will show significant differences from these other uniquely Christian writings. First, it has a global philosophic introduction that places the story of Jesus in a comprehensive frame of reference.

Second, it is often more cryptic in its conversational narratives than are the other gospels, making it harder to understand how or why some of these dialogues could have taken place. Third, while it acknowledges that Jesus did many miracles, it reports only seven of these during his public ministry and elevates the significance of these few by attaching to them deeper and more complex secondary meanings. Fourth, there are extended monologues by Jesus scattered throughout the pages of John's gospel, which are mystical and doctrinal and have no clear parallel to the manner of Jesus' teachings or conversations as recorded by the synoptics. In short, the fourth gospel is a wild ride in and of its own.

Yet it is also so homely and comfortable that elements of it are like old trousers and shirts worn easily. The Greek language, through which the text is communicated, is basic and simple so that even beginner students like me at theological college could quickly read it. Many of its teachings, from the lips of Jesus, have become the inextricable metaphors and motifs by which we know him and ourselves - the good shepherd, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, the vine, and so forth. Some of the conversations Jesus had with others are recorded in a manner that makes us feel as if we were the only ones they were penned for, and we are always sitting next to Jesus again when we read them. Even our Christian theology and world-view has been so shaped, over the centuries, by themes from this document that we cannot separate it from us or imagine Christianity apart from these 21 chapters. The gospel according to John is a key element of faith.

The point John is making as he opens the story of Jesus is that in a world compromised and darkened by sin, the light of eternity begins to shine again, and we who were created for life begin to stir again with divine glory. Jesus, of course, is the first fruits at the head of the new humanity, but we are invited along in the transformation, becoming once again what we were meant to be. Such a focused scope and grand vision reminds me of Victor Hugo's greatest novel. He called his masterpiece, *Les Miserables*, a religious work. So it is. The story echoes the gospel message at nearly every turn. (1)

The main character, Jean Valjean, has been beaten hard by the cruel twists of fate. He has seen the sham of hypocrisy on all sides. So he casts the name of the Lord to the ground like a curse. What does God know of him, and what does it matter? Imprisoned for stealing bread to feed his family and re-sentenced by the vindictive will of his jailer, Jean Valjean finally manages to escape. On his first night of freedom, he stays with a bishop, who treats him well. But behind Jean Valjean's thankful mask is the cunning face of a thief, for the bishop has many valuables.

In the early morning hours, Jean Valjean steals away with some silver plates. When his suspicious appearance brings him under arrest, he is forced to face the bishop again, charged with new crimes. Then the miracle of grace occurs. For in Jean Valjean's eyes the bishop sees something that begs forgiveness and hopes for mercy. Instead of taking revenge, the bishop declares that the silver dishes were a gift to Jean Valjean. In fact, he says Jean Valjean forgot to take the two silver candlesticks he had also given him.

In an instant, the bishop declares Jean Valjean innocent and gives him back his life. But with this gift of forgiveness, he commissions Jean Valjean to bring Christ to others. The rest of Jean Valjean's life becomes a testimony of one who is made new in the grace of divine love. He becomes what he was meant to be. Not only that, but Jean Valjean spends the rest of his life helping his young charge, Cosette, find love and a good marriage. The redeemed becomes the redeemer. The one who has seen the light becomes the light of life for others.

While the parallels can only be drawn so far, there are powerful images that are repeated when trying to work out the deep meanings of life. John, in telling us this story about Jesus, does more than send up a tabloid headline: "Local Boy Turns Water into Wine!" He helps us see the broad sweep of human history in which all our best efforts at marriages and families, societies, and civilisation come undone at the seams because of our weak, arrogant and wicked ways. Only when someone from outside the system names our disease and offers a vaccine against the ravages of original sin will we realise just how deeply we have been stuck in the well of our despair.

Charles Darwin grew up in a Christian home, yet later in life he rejected Christianity's hold on him. How did this loss of faith happen? Here's the explanation from his autobiography: "I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity... disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate but at last it was complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress." The veritable frog in the kettle! Darwin's words could have fallen from the pages of many diaries. The hundreds of families over the last fifty years who have had their children baptised here, confirmed here, like the rest of the Anglican Church in the western world - the world and its distractions have provided them with all the excuses they need, not to pursue and expand a living faith nurtured by a Christian community. For our part we have bent over backwards, have pursued every novelty, thinking that will bring them back as somehow that's what was missing? Darwin's experience is the same as many in the church who have lost their faith, or waned in their interest in the Christian community. They lose it because they don't use it. Because they never do anything with it.

Jesus' first miraculous sign at the wedding of a distant relative in Cana that he helped his mother cater was a billboard on humanity's journey to even darker places. "Turn here!" it cried. "Light is in that direction! Follow the young man, Mary's son, because if you do, the celebration will return to the party!"

Do you believe it or has your complacency with the dull drabness of life in the shadows, made you think, with Charles Darwin and many others, that "ho" and "hum" are the only real words that matter? Listen, Wake up! Get excited! Drink the wine and become again what you were meant to be! Amen.

Fr Robert Newton

1) *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo 1862 Penguin Classics Paperback (1982)