John Porter - Essay from October 20, 2020

Day 218. Victor Hugo was the most forceful and versatile of French novelists. He published Les Miserables in 1862. Upon his death, his body lay in state under the Arc de Triomphe before being buried in the Pantheon. I cannot remember just when I read Les Miserables for the first time or what attracted me to a book of 1253 pages. I have read the book now three times. My second reading was in Paris in 1985. I suppose it is safe to say if a fire were to threaten all the books in the world in some figurative library and I could save only one book, it would be Les Miserables. My penguin classic copy is the one I have read to death. I keep it together with string and ribbon.

I visit his home when in Paris. I look at his desk and wondered if he wrote the novel there. Victor Hugo was no stranger to suffering. You may remember that his beautiful daughter, Léopoldine, drowned at Villequier when her small boat capsized and her heavy dresses pulled her under. She was just 19 and pregnant. Her young husband attempted to save her but he also drowned. Victor Hugo grieved for the rest of his life. The sorrow of human tragedy can be found in so many of his characters.

I am thinking today of Cosette, the daughter of the tragic Fantine. Upon Fantine's death, Jean Valjean promises to find and rescue the young girl from the horrific abuse of the Thenardiers where Cosette is abused and enslaved in their filthy tavern. Valjean does find her and the reader finds her as well in Part II, chapter 3: Fulfillment of a Promise, Section 5: Little girl alone.

Many years ago now, I was looking for a sermon illustration for Christmas Eve. The scripture told the story of the angels at Bethlehem: "For unto you, this day, a Savior is born.... ". The text was appealing enough to send me wondering what a savior might look like. I found one in Jean Valjean.

The Thenardiers in the musical, Les Miserables, are delightful looney tunes and the audience loves their antics. However, in the novel, they embody a consummate evil. In the section "Little girl alone", they send Cosette into the cold and the dark to fetch water from the pool. It is then and there that Valjean sees her as she gropes in the darkness for the small oak tree that stands at the edge of the pool. She is exhausted and the heavy pail is too much for her to carry. A beating would surely await her if she delays.

"She began her return. A cold wind was blowing. There was no light. No leaves on the trees. No play of light. The bare branches rose ominously above her. There was cold and melancholy everywhere. All this was inexpressibly terrible for a child. There is something ugly at work as if her very soul was immersed in darkness.

She was so afraid. She would have run away but for the terror and dread of a mistress who would beat her if she dared go back without the full pail. She seized the handle with both hands and found that it was all she could do to lift it. She struggled for a dozen paces but was forced to put it down again. She rested only to resume her struggle. She walked like one aged in years, the weight of the bucket dragging on her thin arms. The metal handle biting into her freezing hands. The water slopped on her bare legs. And all this was happening to a child of eight in the pitch dark woods at night, far from human gaze. Only God was there to see. She was breathing painful gasps, sobbing under her breath but she could not cry out for the specter of her vicious mistress was always present."

'O God, help me. Please, dear God, help me.' Then it was that she saw that the bucket did not weigh anything. An enormous hand reached down and grasped the handle. Looking up, she saw his form in the darkness. The man had come behind her without her hearing. He had taken the heavy bucket from her without speaking a word. He lifted the bucket and the child in his burly arms. There are instincts which respond to all chance meetings in life. The child was no longer afraid."

I love that image. I do not remember how I used the story on a Christmas Eve so many years ago. But if I were to use it now, I would simply say: there is a Jean Valjean in the life of each of us. And probably more than one. If we are patient, help will come in many guises. There are always instincts at work in the chance meetings in life. We need not fear them.