Luke 15.1-10
1 Timothy 1.12-17
14th September 2025

## I was treated mercifully…

**Introduction to the Theme**

In *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo incorporates an inspirational bishop at the centre of the story.

Jean Val Jean is a French prisoner convicted for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving family. He has been released from the prison hulks on parole. He is welcomed into the bishop’s home to spend the night, much to the housekeeper’s disgust. Sure enough, by morning he has gone AWOL along with two silver candlesticks. Having been treated like a thief he is now acting like one. Once apprehended, and dragged back to the house, the police ask this bishop if he wishes to press charges. Looking at Jean Val Jean he speaks up for him, saying the candlesticks were a gift so, no, there would be no charges.

It was a moment of unexpected mercy. A beautiful moment of kindness and trust in a human being. One that horrified the housekeeper, mystified the policeman, yet one that totally changed the life of Jean Val Jean for the better. That moment of mercy opened up a new life for him and he walked through it gratefully.

No, there’s no story in Les Mis without the mercy of the bishop. And mercy is today’s theme.

That’s because in our reading from 1 Timothy, Paul is just overflowing with gratitude for the way he feels God has treated him in his life. He’s gone from being one of the fiercest critics of Jesus to possibly his greatest admirer – and in this journey he senses God has given him second chances and days of grace for which he is immensely grateful.

For Paul, mercy was personal. So having been shown it from God, he now advocates we show it to each other, that we live lives of mercy. So, let’s go with Paul on his journey this morning from hate to loving kindness.

**The Sermon**

Perhaps like you I have many favourite hymns, and one of them we’ll sing after this sermon. It’s by The Revd Frederick Faber and it’s all about mercy. He was a much-troubled priest from the mid 1800’s, beginning his ministry in the Anglican tradition before transferring to Roman Catholicism and setting up the Brompton Oratory in London. I think, because of that, he felt judged by others but never by God, so writes these beautiful lines:

*But the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our minds.
And the heart of the Eternal*

*Is most wonderfully kind.

And we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own*

*and we magnify God’s strictness
With a zeal he will not own.*
Paul was also a person who changed his religious allegiance. Once he was a zealous fanatic intent on crushing the fledgling church, but then there was that Damascus Road experience which changed him. He arrived not as that church’s persecutor, but newest member and he lived the rest of his life being grateful for God’s mercy.

So in this morning’s epistle we have phrases like those in verses 13 and 16 when he says:  *I was dealt with mercifully.*

Because of his backstory mercy becomes a big part of Paul’s faith.

He’d been a man of violence, and he’d lost the plot.

Yet, says the author of 1 Timothy, it was exactly at this moment in Saul’s life that he receives the mercy of God. It gave him a new life and a new name, and from this point on Paul spoke words of love and laid aside actions of hate.

I think the idea of biblical mercy is both comforting and challenging. It's one we’ll spend a lifetime exploring, sometimes as its giver and often, I suspect, as its receiver.

Yet it can make all the difference and become a central understanding to us about what faith in God looks and feels like.

Myles Coverdale, back in 1535, was the first person to publish the Bible in English. On 218 times when he came upon the word *Kheh-sed* in the Jewish scriptures he translated it as God’s *mercy*. Yet, in truth there isn’t really an ordinary English word that does it justice. So on 30 occasions he translated it as God’s *loving kindness*.

In believing that God is truly merciful towards us, looks upon us with generosity and kindness, and calls us to look upon others in a similar way, we begin to see how our mistakes in life need not be considered as ‘full stops’ but ‘commas’ in life’s journey, from which we can recover.

I think all of us in church this morning can recall a time in our lives when we really felt we had messed up, perhaps even enough for a relationship to come to an end or a phase of life to be shut down. Yet the way someone else treated us, with a loving kindness that we probably didn’t deserve, well that merciful way of responding to us might well have postponed or even abolished the finality we were so dreading. So, to our joy and relief, the relationship continued or that phase of life became just one chapter of many. The full stop became a comma.

Life without mercy, without God’s loving kindness, can be very bleak. And we seem to be in an age when that way of thinking comes from some surprising quarters.

It used to be thought that The Church was the most puritanical of organisations, yet today perhaps the most severe and intolerant judgements actually come online through Social Media.

Young people increasingly say they live in fear of being ‘cancelled’ by their friends if they express an individual thought outside of the ‘group think’ of their peers. Ideas such as sexuality and gender are rightly debated these days with a deeper understanding and a willingness to look at things differently, and we in the Church need to be willingly and generously involved in that process. Yet, in the Social Media world in which many of our children or grand children live what seems at first like liberal tolerance all too quickly becomes group think intolerance if a member of the WhatsApp group offers a different or nuanced view to the others. Reports in the news have recently told us that such people are now regularly and instantly ‘cancelled’. No mercy is shown, no debate is had, instead just one view is tolerated. It’s what I call *Intolerant Tolerance.*

I find myself longing for a world where we make up our minds more slowly before rushing to judgement. One in which we don’t consign people to feel failures forever because they have messed up, but who can live in a world where redemption and mercy is possible.

In the life of Jesus, we glimpse something of the character of God and during his final days, crushed by betrayal and denial Jesus offered mercy. On the cross he asks God to forgive those who drove in the nails because *they know not what they do.* And after the resurrection Jesus looks with mercy upon Peter and his betrayal, picking him up and restoring him, offering him new beginnings. And just maybe, if Judas hadn’t have taken matters into his own hands, he too would have found in Jesus a mercy that would have been wonderfully kind.

None of this would have been easy. Life is messy and we all mess up. Yet Jesus shows us the way.

One of my great heroes of the bible is Ananias of Damascus and the part he played in the conversion of St Paul. Imagine the scene in Straight Street, Damascus the day they met. This firebrand Paul, infamous for his violence against Christians, has arrived in town a changed man, or so he says. But what sort of reception would he have? Ananias is the first on the scene and offers mercy. It took such great courage, don’t you think, to meet your greatest opponent and believe his story, so much so that you greet him with the warm and merciful words of *Brother Saul.*I think it’s one of the most inspiring moments of the New Testament, Ananias’s merciful welcome of Paul.

It seems as if he baptised him and then spent about a year instructing him in the Faith. Yet it all began with a word of mercy, a greeting of love, and a reception flavoured with loving kindness. A full stop became a comma, and a whole new chapter opened up in the life of Paul.

Mercy makes for a kinder world and promotes thousands of small resurrections in everyday life.

Yet it doesn’t ever deny justice or excuse wrong. Indeed, Martin Luther King was a great advocate that justice and mercy are inextricably linked. They always go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other.

So, as he reflects on the mercy shown by the Samaritan towards the Jew in the parable story Jesus told, Martin Luther King said these words: *We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.*Mercy is keen to listen and work towards reconciliation, but it never excuses sin or cruelty, instead it longs for a change of heart and new beginnings. Mercy is one side of the coin, justice is on the other.

The late Pope was a great advocate of this way of thinking; indeed, many believe it was his generosity of spirit, his loving kindness that will long be remembered as the mark of his ministry.

Paul reflects on his chequered life and give thanks that he had been dealt with mercifully. And I suspect many of us feel an equal sense of gratitude to God and to others for the way we have been treated with such loving kindness.

For, as Pope Francis once said in his usual folksy, yet memorably way: *A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just.*

May God’s mercy continue to bless our lives, and may we, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, be merciful in our words and actions to others. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 11th September 2025*