FOCUS: Embrace the wisdom of God that seems foolish in this world.

In a dramatic scene in Les Miserables, the nineteenth-century novel by French author Victor Hugo, Jean Valjean, a former convict who has undergone a tremendous conversion, has the chance to rid himself forever of Inspector Javert, a policeman who has kept him on the run for decades.

In the midst of a violent student uprising in Paris, the revolutionaries have caught Javert spying on them for the military. They hand him over to Valjean who has joined them to secretly protect the young man Marius who is in love with Cosette, the young woman whom Valjean has promised to care for. Valjean could have killed Javert then and there, and no questions would have been asked. But he lets Javert go. He would not sin against God who gave him back his life. Javert was shaken to his core by this act of undeserved mercy. He was a man of the law and believed those who broke the law were unredeemable and deserved no mercy. For him, the world was nothing but a power struggle between those who always fought for law and order and criminals who, for him, were nothing but scum. And so, when this vision of the world was shattered by Valjean’s mercy, Javert who knew nothing of mercy could show none to himself for having persecuted a just man for so long. And so, he killed himself by jumping off a bridge into the Seine River.

The contrast we see in this story between the world views of Valjean and Javert is the contrast we see in today’s readings. Moses, Paul and Jesus show us the way of God that is so different from the way of the world. In God’s way, his perfect way, we see the world through eyes of love, mercy and forgiveness. To the world, this way is foolishness. But in God’s eyes, it is the height of wisdom. Paul called the Christians of Corinth to abandon worldly wisdom and become fools instead some two thousand years ago.

Christ, of course, embodied the wisdom of God that was seen as foolishness by the world when he loved his enemies who embodied the might makes right morality when they arrested him, tortured him, unjustly condemned him to death and nailed him to a cross. Jesus could have crushed his enemies with his divine power. But he, instead, chose the way of mercy, forgiveness and love. When he died on the cross, the way of the world seemed to have triumphed.

But his Resurrection tells the story of the triumph of God’s wisdom. By baptism, we share in his eternal life and are called and empowered by grace to live the life that Christ lived, the vision of the life he laid out in today’s Gospel. These two visions of the world seem locked in a cosmic battle. And, in a way, they are. We carry out that battle in our daily lives. Embrace, then, the wisdom of God that seems so foolish in this world.

But in the past two centuries, we have seen the rise of a philosophy, a way of viewing the world that fully embodies the pagan striving after power and material things that Paul so derided long ago. Thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that the meaning of life was, in the end, about the assertion of one person’s will over and against those of others. Morality could ultimately be summed up as might makes right.

We see this morality manifested in today’s culture of materialism, which can lead people to value things more than their fellow men and women. This is the wisdom of the world that Paul calls us to reject. In the view of thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, loving one’s enemies, rejecting revenge and helping the poor is foolishness that is against our very nature.

It may indeed be against our nature – against our fallen nature. But through grace, we can rise out of this dark vision of the world and rise, step by step, back to the divine glory to which we are called, which our first parents, Adam and Eve, were given but rejected.