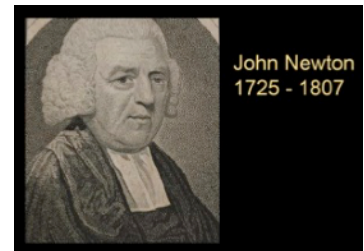


Amazing Grace

John 9:1-41

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!

Do you know these words? Where are they from? Amazing Grace! Do you know the story behind the words? I reckon you might... maybe not fully the story of John Newton who penned the words (maybe you do know this story), but the story of of amazing grace in your life... and in the life of people like the man in our gospel reading today, born blind but who, by the grace and presence of Jesus, came to see; through physical and spiritual eyes to see what reality in Christ is. In this time of uncertainty, fear, and rapid change, we cry out: Lord, send your amazing grace again to us, to all, to your world.



First some things from John Newton's story. He was born in 1725 in England, and as a young lad, loved learning from his mother. He learned the faith from her, but she died tragically of tuberculosis when Newton was just 6 years old. His father then went away to sea for 12 months, and Newton went to boarding school. Newton's father came back after his service, and remarried. The new family moved, and when a new baby came on the scene, John Newton was cut right out.

He went to sea for the first time as an 11 year old. He entered the navy, and tried to desert; and this led to him serving on slave ships. His life went from bad to worse. His depraved life was self-described by Newton as being "the great blasphemer".



Eventually, he became captain of the slave ship the Greyhound, and on 21 March (note the date), which Newton later called his "Great Turning Day", the ship was caught in an almighty storm. As Newton followed a man up on to the deck, this man in front of him was caught in a fierce wave and swept away, never to be seen again. Newton is said to have made it to the ship's wheel and cried out to God, "Lord have mercy on us". He stayed there for 11 hours until the storm abated.

This is said to be the start of his new life, his great turning day. We yearn. We beg for such a turning day at this time of the coronavirus COVID-19, as it affects daily life for so many people. I have listened to a lot of people in past days. To a person, I can say honestly say that life has been affected in many ways and at different levels. The

effects are staggering.

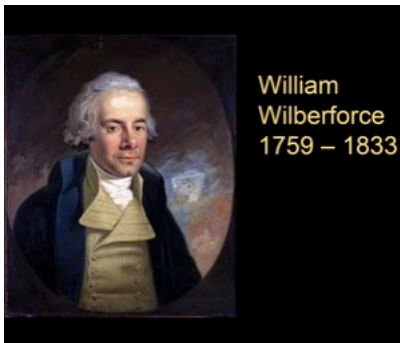
But back to John Newton. His great turning day was not a sudden and final change, zapped with grace; not a sudden overnight change, but rather the start of a new life step by step. This is born out by the fact that Newton did not write the words of *Amazing Grace* for another 24 years, in 1772. Newton later said that, looking back, "If I had any light then, it was as the first faint streak of day light." Maybe this is a word for us to hear again this day.

So John Newton's story is not unlike that of the man born blind, who was healed by Jesus in the gospel today. His disciples ask a question, "Who sinned, was it this man or his parents?" It was a common Jewish conception that special suffering was the result of special sin. "So what's the 'goss' on this guy, Jesus?" Don't we still find that type of cause and effect approach to faith and sickness or injury even today? Anyway, Jesus says that it was neither of these. This premise is wrong, and Jesus says so. Now he will show the work of God, the gracious power of God to restore. Here literally comes Light in the darkness. Jesus, the Messiah restores the man's sight, and it will be a gradual progression of faith: a progression of confession as the man first calls Jesus the man who healed me; and then he is a prophet from God; and ultimately he confesses, "Lord, I believe."



Jesus comes to heal, to turn, to change, to bring hope, to bring life. **We** can therefore cry out, pray, look to Jesus, and say, "Come Lord, come into this weary world which we occupy right now. Come Lord, come, and rescue us."

For John Newton, not only do his words of confession and faith live on today as we sing them and know them for ourselves (we sang them at my son's wedding two weeks ago, and we'll sing them today); but what's more, Newton went on to meet a man named William Wilberforce, a powerful speaker who was weighing up the call to the ministry or a call to politics. John Newton encouraged him to stay in politics, and within two years of this discussion, Wilberforce was taking up the fight to abolish the slave trade which he was to champion. Amazing story. Amazing grace. Amazing hope for us today too.



I don't know what became of the man who was healed by Jesus. His lot was still not easy. My story is not as inspiring or as dramatic as that of John Newton. I don't know about yours so well. But together we live in a time where amazing grace is sorely

needed, and amazing grace is ours to receive each day in Jesus' presence for us in the Word, and it is ours to give in our living. What I know is that each of us shares the common amazing story, that Jesus has come to find us in our lostness, in our spiritual lostness and spiritual blindness. Jesus by his Word of grace, by his act of sacrifice, by his life of love on earth for you, for me and for all people, walks the journey with us patiently as our eyes are opened more and more to him, the light of the world.

And what's even more amazing is that Jesus equips us to be his gifts in bringing his light and life to others. The story of coming to faith, as Dean Eaton encourages always to remember, is the story of encounters and steps on the way to conversion and growth. Don't ever underestimate the amazing grace God brings through you, as you help others into the light to be met by Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

This was the story of John Newton. He died in 1807, nine months after the Act to abolish the slave trade was passed in parliament. But he leaves us with another wise insight. He said to a close friend as he neared death, "Two things I know: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour."



Lord, I believe. Grace. Amazing grace! For you, for me, for all people. Amazing grace. How sweet the sound.

Amen.