

All Saints' Church

Cottenham with Rampton



Pastoral Letter #58

26th May 2021

Dear Church Family,

Last week, I was reminded of the story of John Newton, whose life demonstrates the title of his most famous hymn, '*Amazing Grace*'. Most of us grew up singing the hymn but may not know very much about his life.

Newton was born in London in 1725 to a seagoing father and a devout mother. He followed his father to sea at the age of eleven but rejected his mother's faith, becoming a rebellious, reckless and immoral youngster. He had an ability to find trouble: rejecting good jobs, being fired after six sea voyages and, aged nineteen, press-ganged into the Royal Navy. He deserted, was caught and given a public flogging. Managing to leave the Navy, Newton became involved in the slave trade, shipping slaves from Africa to North America. Having made many enemies, he found himself left behind in Africa by his colleagues and was there imprisoned in chains and treated brutally for eighteen months.

When Newton was rescued in 1748 he showed no signs of repentance. Nevertheless, as he sailed back to Britain his ship was struck by a severe storm. As the vessel began to sink Newton began to pray, throwing himself on the mercy of God. Somehow the ship was able to make it back safely to the British Isles. Although Newton later considered his prayer to mark the moment of his conversion he was to write, '*I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterwards.*' However, change had started and Newton began to pray and to read the Bible.

At the age of twenty-nine, after ill health, Newton gave up seafaring and instead took a job in the port of Liverpool. There his Christian life started to blossom and he came under the influence of those great preachers of the Methodist revival, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. Newton's life changed and he became involved in evangelical fellowships and in organising Bible study. He sought ordination in the Church of England and became curate of Olney in Buckinghamshire. He was a lively, committed and caring pastor who taught the Bible and preached appealing and relevant sermons.

The poet and hymn writer William Cowper moved to Olney and he and Newton became close friends. Together, they set about writing hymns. Newton's contribution included many hymns that remain popular including '*Amazing Grace*', '*How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*' and '*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*'.

After sixteen years of fruitful ministry in Olney, Newton moved to a City of London church in 1780. There, at the heart of the nation, he was able to be a powerful influencer, encouraging, counselling and promoting in every way, a vibrant evangelical Christianity. When the young and promising politician William Wilberforce became converted and was

tempted to leave politics for the church, Newton encouraged him to stay in Parliament and 'serve God where he was'. How wonderful that he took this advice.

By now the national mood was turning against slavery, and Newton, still grieved over his own involvement decades earlier, wrote a powerful pamphlet – *'Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade'* – based on his own experiences. It circulated widely and was greatly used in helping Wilberforce in his ultimately successful campaign against the slave trade.

Newton died in 1807 aged eighty-two, after fifty years of service to Christ and just months after slavery was ended across the British Empire.

There are many things to challenge us in John Newton's life but to me the most striking are those that arise out of his conversion. The transformation of Newton from the messiest of lives to a gracious servant of God teaches the life-changing potential of an encounter with Christ. Ultimately, Christianity is not a matter of morality; it's about *Jesus changing lives*. His story reminds us that while we cannot save ourselves, God can and does. In the words of 'Amazing Grace', Newton came to God as an undeserving 'wretch' who was 'lost' and 'blind', yet Christ saved him. But this wasn't an overnight conversion, reminding us all that it may take a long time after the seed is planted for the flower of faith to blossom. There's no doubt that during Newton's life he *did* receive abundant grace. But it's important to note that, having received grace, he shared it with others. The rich grace God gave to Newton spilled over into many lives and into the world.

Among John Newton's last recorded words were these: *'My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and Christ is a great saviour.'* Something to which we can all say 'Amen'!

Don't forget the APCM this Sunday at approx. 11.30am, after the 10.30am service. Do read the reports in advance of the meeting and come with any questions. Also this Sunday we are launching 'Worship in the Woods', our new outdoor 'service' for all ages. It's going to be a lovely day so do join us at 3pm just inside the church gates.

It's been lovely to see more of you return to church after the easing of restrictions and second vaccinations. We will be looking to re-start Junior Church in-person shortly, as well as return to tea/coffee in the Church Hall after the service (from June 21st). As indoor visits are now permitted, I'm very happy to visit anyone who would like me to do so. Just let me know.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

Best wishes,

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