

Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon for the BBC Radio 4 Sunday Service which focussed on the 250th anniversary of the hymn Amazing Grace being first sung in public.

You can listen to the whole service [here](#)

“Near the end of his life, the former slave trader John Newton said to a friend, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great saviour”.

As we mark the life of John Newton this morning we also celebrate another life, that of Pope Emeritus Benedict the Sixteenth who died yesterday. Doubtless he would have echoed Newton’s reflection that Christ is a great saviour. For Pope Benedict said – “If you follow the will of God, you know that in spite of all the terrible things that happen to you, you will never lose a final refuge.”Joining dear companions in the Catholic Church as we all give thanks for the life and witness of Pope Benedict, we commend him to the God he served so faithfully, praying, as ever, for the unity of God’s church, and for the souls of all the faithful departed. May he rest in peace and rise in glory

John Newton had good reason to say that Christ is a great saviour for he had been:

- a rebellious merchant seaman.
- Flogged with the cat-o-nine tails, press-ganged into the Royal Navy,
- Escaped, then treated like a slave in Africa.
- Desperately ill.
- Recovered; became a slave trader himself, shamelessly bartering people for goods;
- lost what religious faith he had,
- became a Freethinker, anti-God and a notorious blasphemer.
- Got a job as a Merchant Navy Captain.
- Almost died at sea.
- Transported slaves across continents.

And yet after another near-death experience, he began to ‘doubt his doubts’, started to study the Bible and gradually found faith taking root.

Much later on he actually became a Vicar.

Newton wrote many essays, poems and hymns - the best-known one begins,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me.

It was the story of his life. All that time when John Newton had let go of God, God hadn’t let go of him. Amazing.

John Newton isn't the only one to be amazed by God's grace. The Number One British rap artist, Stormzy, sung of his own experience with these similar words -

I'm Blinded By Your Grace...

... ever since you found me

I'm blinded by your grace

You came and saved me...

This is my story too. Not as dramatic. Not so much darkness. But it was God's grace that got me, the sudden - and at the same time slowly dawning, taking a lifetime to work out - realisation that changes everything, even how you deal with your own past, that God is no longer a vague 'something or other over the hill and far away', but close, real, with us and for us in Jesus Christ.

I'm blinded by your grace.

And of course you don't deserve it. That's what grace means - it's God's generosity; God's energy, God's searching and redeeming love.

You can't earn it and you certainly can't buy it.

And even if you're looking for God, which of course some people are, the deeper truth is that God is looking for you. And God won't stop. And there's nowhere to hide, nor sin so foul and dark that God will turn away.

God's amazing grace isn't just for so called bad people. But drowning you're more likely to be on the lookout for a lifeguard.

And although being good is good, there's also the danger that we think our goodness is enough. And it never is. There's always something we're hiding. And we are lost in the confusion of it all.

Most of us, in fact, are a muddle.

And Jesus really cares about those who are muddled and lost or dwelling in darkness.

That's why he told so many stories about it.

About a shepherd and a lost sheep who contrary to all sensible conventions doesn't play a percentages game and reckon there has to be loss as well as profit, and leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of the one who is lost.

About a father and a lost son; who doesn't give up on his errant children; who welcomes home the one who had squandered his inheritance and pleads with the other to join the homecoming celebrations: "This son of mine was lost," he said, "but now he is found."

Amazing grace.

We cannot pass over or ignore the horrors of John Newton's life, but neither should we underestimate the power of God's grace in his redemption. It is indeed amazing grace. "I once was lost", he wrote - taking those words of the Father to the wayward son and making them his own - "But now I'm found; was bound, but now I'm free".

And here we are in the darkest time of the year, celebrating again the light of Christ and seeing one year turn to another. May the light and grace of Christ save us.

4 min read

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