

5 September 2021

St George's Zoom

AMAZING GRACE

It gives me a great pleasure to introduce you to, without doubt, the Best Hymn Ever Written.

To earn that lofty award requires more than a great tune and great lyrics. What separates out the best from the great is the combination of a great tune, memorable lyrics, great theology and the composer's own story. Combine these together, add some voices, and something truly transcendent happens. In other words to claim the coveted title of the best hymn ever written, the hymn must move us ... and indeed move God.

There is of course only one winner! The most played, admired and covered song in church history.

- It has been sung by slaves in the American South
- It was played the day after 9/11
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- Famously sung at Wembley Stadium in 1998 to close the celebrations for Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday by Jessye Norman

Now that is a story of the transcendence of music. Jessye Norman - the famous African American opera singer came on stage to close the concert of some of the biggest bands in rock music and the crowd started to boo – they wanted an encore from Guns and Roses instead. Undeterred, she started to sing, no accompaniment, only a single spotlight and as she sang the charged and boisterous crowd progressively fell silent. She finished the hymn and there was this long moment of silence as the crowd realized they had experienced

the transcendent and then the applause began and built and built and built.

So let me introduce you to the story behind 'Amazing Grace'

Context

John Newton was the Vicar of Olney – a working class parish of lacemakers and agricultural workers some 60 miles north of London. He wrote hymns to illustrate his sermon and to help his largely working class and often illiterate congregation remember his teaching.

New Year's Eve 1748 and John Newton sits down to write his New Year's sermon. The text was 1 Chronicles where King David learns from Nathan the prophet that God intends to establish his throne forever through the line of David. Overcome, David is reflecting back on God's extraordinary goodness and faithfulness to him.

"What am I Lord God and what is my family that you have brought me thus far?"

And like King David, with amazement and deep gratitude, Newton begins to reflect back on his life to date:

- Amazing Grace, that saved a wretch like me
- Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come
- How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed
- 'Tis Grace that has brought me safe thusfar and grace will lead me home

Amazing Grace, is John Newton's spiritual autobiography.

He wrote it with no tune in mind – and it seems the hymn was only recited once on that New Year's day before it disappeared into oblivion.

Whilst it languished in popularity in the UK it soon took off in the USA, when William Walker, a travelling collector of lyrics and tunes paired the little known tune 'New Britain' with Newton's lyrics and Amazing Grace, as we know it today, was born.

It has gone on to become:

- the most sung, the most recorded and the most loved hymns of all time
- I've witnessed it performed around the world in multiple languages
- It even made it to Star Trek the movie when Spock died

But it's not without its controversies:

The greatest criticism is reserved for the opening stanza – that saved a 'wretch' like me. The word *wretch* troubles our modern day sensitivities and for anyone who has struggled with issues of self-image or self-worth it can be either seen as condemning or liberating. But as we are about to find out, when it came to John Newton, 'wretch' was a very apt description of his life.

John Newton

Born 1725 – almost 300 years ago in England

His father was a sea captain and often away at sea for up to a year.

His mother was a believer and she taught John Newton from an early age to read the bible and to pray.

She died while he was young and his father promptly remarried an Italian woman and started a new family. John increasingly felt abandoned and estranged.

He was a wild and angry young man who rebelled against authority at every opportunity.

But in the midst of all this 17 year old John meets and falls wildly in love with the lovely, kind and very sweet 14 year old Polly. Their

mothers had been friends and when the two children were infants they talked about marrying each other, but with the death of his mother the two families drifted apart until they were reunited. Clearly far too young for him to declare his intentions, and with no means to support, her if they were to marry, he not so patiently decides to wait until she is older.

Then fate intervenes.

Pressed ganged at the age of 18 to serve in the Royal Navy. Miserable time of it. He attempts to desert, is caught and publicly flogged beaten senseless and dismissed for insubordination. He writes that he was so filled with a bitter rage and black despair that he would have either murdered the captain or committed suicide but for his love for Polly Catlett.

Discharged from the navy he remains a sailor and engages in every possible vice including witchcraft, making it his aim to practice every vice and seduce others into following him.

He falls foul of his employer's black mistress who has him imprisoned for twelve months in chains, beaten senseless and left to starve. Finally freed he is back at sea but his temper has only worsened. His temper, his blaspheming and aggressive atheism shocked even his shipmates.

Halfway across the Atlantic out of boredom he picks up a copy of Thomas a Kempis '*The Imitation of Christ*' He starts to worry that it words might be true – so angry, he slams the book shut and goes to sleep only to be woken in the middle of the night to a terrible storm and cry 'the ship is sinking'

The ship is badly holed, waterlogged and beginning to sink. He tries to climb a ladder up on to the deck only to see the man above him washed out to sea by an enormous wave. Somehow he manages to make his way to the ships wheel and to his astonishment begins to

pray 'Lord have mercy on us' 11 hours later the storm begins to subside and Newton felt at peace for the first time ever – "I knew God had answered my prayers".

Newton immediately stopped swearing, began to read his bible and pray and started to change his lifestyle. It was to be a long journey with quite a few miss steps along the way.

He returns to England declares his love for Polly but with no means to support her if they are to marry. So once again he returns to sea this time as the captain of a slave ship plying the coast of Africa for human cargo. At first he does not see any conflict between his emerging faith and his life as a slave captain. Indeed it is while he is at anchor waiting for a next cargo of slaves – he writes the hymn *How sweet the name of Jesus Sounds*.

Ultimately he leaves the slave trade and later still renounces the slave trade going on to publish extensively on the evils of the slave trade – a trade which he had actively and enthusiastically engaged in. He studies theology, is mentored by Wesley and Whitfield and applies for ordination – but it is seven years before the C of E finally appoints him to the parish of Olney.

He goes on to have an extraordinary ministry in Olney and later on in London where he befriends a young William Wilberforce and has perhaps the most important conversation of his life. Deeply troubled Wilberforce seeks Newton's advice – whether or not to abandon a political career and pursue a life of godly contemplation and prayer. Newton reminds him his call is to serve God in the public square not his private rooms. Later that day Wilberforce goes on to pen those amazing words – 'God has set before me two missions – the reformation of manners and the abolition of the slave trade'.

Newton's own career continued to flourish – continued to preach to ever expanding and packed out congregations, he wrote and published hymns with his friend the famous William Cowper. He authored some of the most widely read books on theology and he continued his efforts as an abolitionist.

Oh, and by the way, he did manage to win the heart of young Polly and they were very happily married for 40 years before her death.

Newton himself died aged in 1807 – living just long enough to see the passage of Wilberforce's bill forbidding the trading in slaves.

Purportedly the last words Newton uttered were:

I am a great sinner but Christ is a great Saviour.

Why do I think this hymn has touched millions?

It illustrates some very simple yet profound truths:

- No one is beyond the love of Jesus
- That Jesus has the power to transform lives
- No matter how lost we may feel, we will be found
- That there is nothing we can do to earn God's favour nor for that matter, lose his favour
- This life, no matter what trials and tribulations it brings, is only the prelude to a glorious life where one day we will be singing God's praises forevermore

Like grace itself – the profound simplicity of these eternal truths are reflected in the simple melody. Musically it is not complex. It is a short hymn. There is no pretension in the melody. The lyrics do not require explanation. In my mind, this adds rather than detracts from the power of the hymn.

Something happens to me when I sing Amazing Grace, especially so in the company of others. Time compresses – I realise I am joining in a song that has been sung for over 200 years. It has been sung:

- at Weddings and Funerals
- By the enslaved as well as the free
- At moments of great civic occasion as well as quietly around a camp fire
- Performed acapella as well as accompanied by bagpipes
- In stadiums and living rooms
- And it will continue to be sung long after I am gone

Conclusion

I am not sure what Heaven's Spotify playlist of tunes will include. One thing I am confident of is that Amazing Grace will make it to the playlist.

*Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The Hour I first believed.*

And that is what is so amazing about Amazing Grace.