

Amazing Grace

It's not often that a movie is named after a hymn, but this is the case with the film "Amazing Grace". The title comes from the hymn written by John Newton.

The movie tells the story of William Wilberforce and his campaign to abolish the British slave trade. As a young politician, he began to argue in parliament that trading in slaves was wrong and should be stopped. He met strong resistance and he was tempted to give up the fight as a hopeless cause but in 1807 he finally succeeded in having a bill passed that abolished the slave trade throughout the British empire.

One of the people who influenced William Wilberforce was John Newton, who wrote the words of the hymn "Amazing Grace". John Newton had once been the captain of a slave ship but while steering his vessel through a storm he underwent a dramatic conversion. He came to regret the misery he had inflicted on the thousands of slaves he had crammed into his ship over the years and he decided to devote the rest of his life to spreading the message of Christ.

The hymn is a prayer of thanks for his conversion. He considers that he had been a "wretch" and is amazed at the grace, the gift, of God that had saved a wretch like him. He had once been blind to so much – including the human dignity of those he had transported as slaves – but now, through the mercy of God, he could see.

John Newton's experience was like the experience of a central character in today's gospel – a man who was blind but then was healed by Jesus. In fact, some of the words of the hymn are very close to the words of the gospel. In the hymn, John Newton wrote "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." The once-blind man in St John's gospel says: "I only know that I was blind and now I can see."

Today's text from St Paul might set us thinking of ways that we too were once blind but now have been healed by Christ. St Paul's words were originally addressed to Christians in Ephesus but they also have a message for us today. He writes: "You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord. Be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth."

The early Christians saw baptism as a way of being enlightened by Christ. In our baptism rite today, we light a candle from the Easter candle as a sign that the one who has been baptised has received new light from Christ, the light of the world. Then, echoing the words of St Paul, the celebrant encourages the newly baptised to walk as children of light. "You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts."

This season of Lent is a time for preparing for baptism or for renewing our baptismal commitment to Christ. It is a time to give thanks for the amazing grace of God and to say with joy, "I was blind, but now I see."