

SUNDAY 30TH MAY TRINITY SUNDAY

Thought for the week: "Trinity Sunday: what's so amazing about Grace."

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see."

So goes the opening verse of the great hymn by John Newton (1725-1807) that, according to popular statistics, has about 30,000 different versions in records archives and is sung approximately 10 million times a year in many different settings as much today as it has ever been, and just as controversial: from Star Trek (Star Trek II – following the death of Mr Spock), to Judy Collin's famous anti-Vietnam war version that was top ten in both the US and UK charts back in the 1970's and later covered by The Scots Dragoon Guards, which got the Band leader into trouble, to Lori Marie Key, a nurse from Michigan who sang such a heart moving version to millions at the COVID memorial in January this year.



So, "Amazing Grace" is popular and still well-known today. But like anything 'popular' and 'well-known' it can then suffer from a sort of 'watering down,' a 'domestication,' a loss of 'edge,' a self-limiting ceiling placed upon it that we somehow therefore 'know' what "Amazing Grace" therefore is and means. But the clue maybe in the title "AMAZING Grace."



The story of Yassir Eric "From Jihad to Jesus" can be found as part of the "One for Israel" series on Youtube: "From Jihad to Jesus"

I recently saw a testimony video by a Sudanese gentleman, Yassir Eric who had gone through an amazing transformation from being someone brought up to hate non-Muslims to someone who had come to love Jesus. Incredible though this is, and it is not without cost as Yassir has been pronounced 'dead' by his family, the real moment of "amazing grace" comes not from Yassir himself, but from a childhood schoolboy in his class called Zachariah, a Coptic Christian, who was badly beaten and left for dead by Yassir and his friends. Zachariah survived the beating and wrote Yassir's name in the front of his Bible. Twenty-five years later, at a Christian convention in Egypt, Yassir met a Sudanese Pastor, who broke down in tears when he saw him. Asking who he was and why he was crying, the man said, "my name is Zachariah and I have been praying for you all this time." Yassir has made it his life's work to tell of this moment when truly "Amazing Grace" touched his life.

A similar experience could be said of Michael Barton, who along with Paul Taylor, killed Anthony Walker in a racially motivated attack in Liverpool in 2005 only to be publicly forgiven in the courtroom by Anthony's mother Gee Walker. I heard Gee Walker speak at a conference in 2015 and she was adamant that it wasn't about her being somehow 'heroic' in what she had done but that she took God seriously and it was about her son's legacy: Gee Walker has since set up a trust in Anthony's name to promote racial harmony in Liverpool.



Now, we may not, hopefully, have ever had to go through such traumatic experiences as these two individuals. But we all have our own stories. We may not find that we can go as far as Zachariah or Gee Walker in being able to forgive outright those who have done us even the harm that has been done to us and is only a memory away, but this need not take away from recognising the courage of these two individuals and also from recognising the life-transforming power of the costly grace that their convictions and actions released.



“Costly grace” was a key aspect of a book written in the 1930’s “The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor who stood up to Hitler and the German Church as National Socialism sought to reduce faith at the time in Germany to popularism and political identity. Bonhoeffer sought to encourage his students to ponder the true ‘cost’ of forgiveness, not to simply say, “well, I’m a Christian and because God is all loving, I therefore have to forgive.”

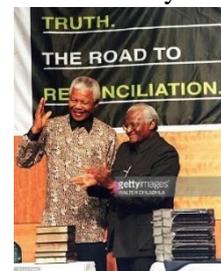
This he called “cheap grace,” as it skims over the surface without taking into any account what it truly ‘costs’ the individual who has been wounded, what it would ‘cost’ to forgive, both to the victim and to God. “Costly grace,” by contrast acknowledges fully what has taken place, including its emotions and lasting impact, and then chooses even so to reach out through and beyond accountability, judgment, and pain to something more, to the hope of a transformed life and a transformed world.

The following quote from Bonhoeffer gives a flavour of what he is reaching for:

“Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

(taken from “The Cost of Discipleship” – unaltered from the original but which clearly relates to the experience and hope of everyone, both women and men)

So impressed with these words was the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, that he took this very passage as his guiding light for his work in and though the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” in South Africa in the 1980’s, which along with the same “costly forgiveness” displayed so powerfully and personally by Nelson Mandela himself, did so much to give hope not only to post-Apartheid South Africa but indeed the world.



Why does all this matter?

Because without such occurrences of “Amazing Grace” nothing will change for the better. The world knows only justice, blame and accountability. When we get hurt or wounded it provokes protest and anger – rightly so. But if this does not lead on to reaching for “Amazing Grace” with similar or even greater energy beyond self then we stand to become divided in ever fragmented “Identity Politics” – only black people can understand and speak to black people, only women can understand and speak to women, because we mistrust and are so hurt, and into which nationalist leaders, certain businesses and the underworld seek to exploit and conquer, justifying their actions as “protecting” or “understanding” their people. Look at Belarus, look at Turkey, look at Syria, Iran, and so much of the Middle East including so pointedly Israel and Palestine.

We don't get beyond the 'game line' by judgement or justice alone, annoyingly. It seems to need something else and that is why God gave the world "the Cross" and all that took place there to inspire and to help humanity to see that life beyond judgement is possible. God in His wisdom seems to have almost known this from the beginning (certainly if you read the hymn of St Paul in Philippians 2:5-11).

He has such hope for the world that He Himself was willing to take the first step and be the first to offer each of us His own "Amazing Grace," available to all without fear or favour, not just two thousand years ago but timelessly, across all time and all space in every encounter, in every situation, great and small, on the world stage and in the privacy of our own deepest and heartfelt longings. Always as gift and freely offered, yet which costs everything.



For these reasons, and I'm sure many more, the Cross, for me, and the "Amazing Grace" it symbolises and embodies, goes to the very DNA of the Trinity and what a Christian understanding of God is about. To me, the Trinity almost doesn't make sense without the Cross. It is the "costly" self-giving love that holds the Trinity together and from which radiates the ability to not only love the world but to bring the world into the possibility of sharing in this same self-giving hope of transformation (See Romans ch 8). For me, it is no wonder that Andre Rublev, when he painted his famous depiction of the Trinity all those years ago in the fifteenth century painted the right hand of Christ as the hand of willing blessing over the chalice containing His own outpouring of His blood for the world, and with the tree of life behind His left shoulder tantalisingly showing us "here is the way."

Maybe we can all take a lead from Him, and from Zachariah and Gee Walker, and like Zachariah, think of one or two names we might want to write in the front of our Bibles and begin to pray for...

Matt Thomson



Worship: Next Sunday – Sunday 6th June at 10.30am will be in Congresbury – Sermon Series: Questions for today's Church?"

We have our first couple of question which we are going to be looking at over the coming weeks:

6th June "Pizza or Burgers" – a Christian response to Ecology and caring for the Planet and how we think about food and food production.

13th June "If Jesus could vote, who would He vote for and why?" – a Christian approach to politics local and global.

Thank you for sending these questions in and we would love to receive others. If you would like to ask a question you can do so either in writing, by email or the website, or by dropping in to either of the Churches or the Church Office.

Annual Church Meetings:

Following the Annual Church Meetings in both Churches this week, the following people have been elected as Church Wardens and as part of the “Warden Team” in both Churches:

Banwell:

Church Wardens: Kirsty Bowles and Maggie McCarthy

Associate Wardens: Romany Poppet-Price, Georgina Walker, and Laura Heathcote

Congresbury:

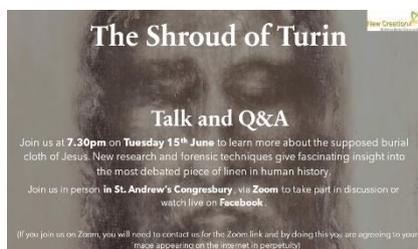
Church Wardens: Sonya Stocker and Ruth Wratten

Associate Wardens: Lynda Fell and Rosemary Bailey

Treasurers in both Churches and New Creation: Beth Ashton-Hilton and Bob Mitchell

PCC Secretaries: Dinah Harrison and David Ashton-Hilton

Please give thanks for all these good people as they take up or continue in their roles and in serving the wider Church family for the coming year.



Something different for the Summer: “talk on the Latest Research into the Turin Shroud, how it was formed and what it represents” – Tuesday 15th June at 7.30pm in Congresbury Church, also via Zoom and Livestreamed.

You may have heard about the Turin Shroud and, like me, maybe dismissed it as either romantic legend or a medieval forgery (especially following the headlines of carbon dating from the 1980’s). But much research and many advances have been made in science and technology since then leading to some, quite literally, incredible findings.

The forty minute talk will try and give an overview of some of these and also some of the implications and questions they then leave with us. The Shroud of Turin has always been highly controversial, but this talk will simply try and share some of the information and studies that have come forward and leave it up to each person to try and work out their response to it and as to what it means. The talk will then be followed by a Q&A session.

If you would like to join in you can do so either physically in Congresbury Church, or via Zoom (simply contact Georgina Walker or Kirsty Bowles via email: georginawalker1994@gmail.com or Kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk in order to get the link details, or the session will be Livestreamed over Facebook Live – as we have done with Sunday services).

Matt Thomson