

19 Jan 2020

Evensong.

Epiphany 2

**May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.**

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'

.....Words I'm sure you know well, the hymn 'Amazing Grace' was  
penned by John Newton during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,  
between about 1760 and 1790.

And the words just about summed up Newton's sudden conversion to  
Christianity. He was a successful seaman, following in the footsteps  
of his father, who was a sea captain himself, and soon found himself  
in the lucrative slave trade, involving ships, often from the West  
Country ports such as Bristol or Plymouth.

They took cheap English manufactured goods to West Africa, which  
they traded for slaves, who were transported in chains on their  
crowded vessels across the Atlantic to the West Indies and the coast  
of North America.

There the slaves were sold at market, the vessels finally bringing  
goods such as sugar, cotton and so on back to Britain. It was indeed a  
series of profitable voyages and many ship-owners soon became rich  
on the trade.

Newton was converted suddenly to religion when a great storm  
struck his ship and all on board nearly perished. It was only their  
cargo of beeswax and timber that helped keep the stricken ship afloat.

Although now a Christian, he remained for a further six years in the  
slave trade, all the time, concerned about the ethics of the trade and  
wondering whether he should continue, when, just two days before

he was due to go to sea as captain of yet another ship, he was struck by a sudden fit, and lost consciousness. When he recovered, his doctors advised him not to go to sea so soon, a decision that he saw as a sign from God, reinforced when the ship he was due to go on was severely damaged in another storm, with much loss of life.

He saw this as a message from God to change his ways, and despite being initially turned down for the church, eventually he was ordained as a curate. But the pain of having been involved in the slave trade made him start to campaign against it, and he was very influential in the later decision of William Wilberforce to begin his fight against slavery.

Sudden conversion stories are nothing new.... And often, like St Paul's incredible conversion from someone who hated Christians and persecuted and killed them, ...into arguably the person who was the most influential Christian who ever lived, or at least the person who had the greatest effect on the spread of Christianity, the conversion comes like a bolt from the blue, changing someone from Atheism or Agnosticism, into a firm believer in God and Christ Jesus.

The Prophet Ezekiel whom we heard in our first reading was also one. He was one of the Jews whilst they were enduring their long exile in Babylon when he had a sudden vision and saw a blinding light, much as Paul did several hundred years later. He heard a message from God sending him to the people of Israel as a prophet to get them to change their evil ways.

The writer C S Lewis, a quietly spoken professor of Oxford and Cambridge who wrote the 'Chronicles of Narnia' and the 'Screwtape letters' was also someone who, as an Atheist in his early life, was, at 31 years of age, sitting in his room at Magdalen College when he was suddenly struck by a truth that God was after all, real and was calling him.

At that stage and for some time afterwards, he didn't consider himself a Christian, but after his experience with God, he found himself a 'theist' rather than 'Atheist' and as such, still didn't feel appropriate to enter a church building.

He could see the sense of people praying individually, but thought the churches with all their fussiness, the bells, the bustle, the notices, the crowds, the perpetual organising and so on were unattractive, and he found the hymns most disagreeable and of all musical instruments he said he liked the organ the least!

But this all changed one day on a trip to a zoo – he said 'When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but when we reached Whipsnade, I did'.

Just like that! – He had not spent the journey in thought or in great emotion, but he said it was like when someone, lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that they are now awake.....

St Paul's conversion, on the road to Damascus, was indeed a game changer for the Christian message and for the spread of Christianity.

As we heard in our second reading, and as described in much more detail in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul experienced a sudden blinding light, and a voice that he realised could only have come from God, telling him to stop persecuting him, and to go out to the nations to spread the word.

Paul didn't immediately turn back to see St Peter and the disciples and followers who were practising their faith in and around Jerusalem. After receiving instruction in the faith from Ananias and the small group of Christian followers in Damascus he travelled widely, preaching and teaching on Jesus so profoundly that a number of devout Jews of the town plotted to put him to death, and he was spirited away at night.

Paul eventually did meet St Peter, as described in the reading, and they agreed that his Mission should be to go and spread the Good News far and wide, to the Gentiles who lived in what is now Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, and on to Rome itself.

Over the years, as we now know, Paul's missionary journeys inspired the conversion of many communities and helped spread Christianity across the then known world, while, sadly, the efforts of the Christian communities in the Holy Land itself, where Christ himself lived and taught, gradually became less influential.

Perhaps it was that the people didn't like being reminded that it was they themselves that had put him to death, or it was the influence of the Pharisees, Scribes and temple officials who also had an overwhelming belief that they were in the right, and never accepted they could be wrong, that the Christian message, after its initial successful expansion through Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem, started to fade gradually over the subsequent 100 years or so, in the lands of its creation.

Christ himself, though he came specifically to save the chosen Hebrew race had said that a prophet is not without dishonour, except in his own town, and this was eventually to become very clear.

But God often has surprises for people. We are all different. We might not all experience a blinding flash of light or a voice from heaven like St Paul, or the prophet Ezekiel, but, perhaps like CS Lewis, in the quiet of our own space, come to realise and be inspired by the reality of the message.

Others of us might have always felt there was something there ...that they now know to be God, .....and yet others may still be searching for the truth. But God has ways and means to enter into our lives, .....whether we expect it, ..or not. Amen..