

Father O'Connor's Homily for 23 June 2024
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Job 38: 1, 8-11
2 Corinthians 5: 14-17
Mark 4: 35-41

John Newton [1725-1807] was the son of a British sea captain. When John was ten, his mother died and he went to sea with his father.

The boy learned the sea backwards and forwards. At 17, however, he rebelled against his father, left the ship, and began living a wild life.

Eventually John took a job on a cargo ship that carried human beings from Africa to America where they were to be sold as slaves. John soon became the captain of the ship.

John never worried about whether the slave trade was right or wrong. He just did it. It was a way to make money. Then something happened to change all that.

One night a violent storm blew up at sea. The waves grew to the size of mountains. They picked up Newton's ship and threw it around like a toy. Everyone on board was filled with panic.

Then Newton did something that he hadn't done since leaving his father's ship. He prayed. Shouting at the top of his voice, he said, "God, if you will only save us, I promise to be your servant forever." God heard his prayer and the ship survived.

When Newton reached land, he kept his promise and quit the slave trade. Later he studied for the ministry and became the pastor of a small church in England. There he became a gifted preacher and a composer of hymns.

One of the most well-known hymns that Newton wrote is one that praises God for his conversion. The words read:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found -
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come.
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

This section, printed in italics, I wrote but did not deliver in my homilies this weekend. It is about the possible origin of the melody that we sing to the words of John Newton's hymn text, "Amazing Grace." To hear a fuller explanation by the African-American musician, Wintley Phipps, you may

access this website link: **Bill & Gloria Gaither -**

Amazing Grace ft. Wintley Phipps (Live)

8:36 <https://youtu.be/qNuQbJst4Lk?si=MLDhG5kB7dNJqvy4>

Let me tell you a little bit about the music that many of the people who were transported here in slavery from Africa called their own.

Many of the Black Spirituals that we know today are built upon a 5-note scale which is called a pentatonic [5-tone] scale. You can play the melodies using only the 5 black keys on the piano. This became known as the black or the slave scale. It is very different from the scale that begins do-re-mi, which is sometimes, by contrast, known as the white scale.

John Newton composed the words to the hymn Amazing Grace. But no composer is given credit for the melody.

One theory is that, as captain of a slave ship, John Newton likely would have heard those being transported below deck singing a West African sorrow chant, based on the 5-note scale. And that this might have so imbedded itself in John Newton's memory that this "sorrow chant" tune might have come to be wedded with his text of Amazing Grace.

The story of John Newton bears a striking resemblance to today's Gospel. Like Newton, the Apostles got caught in a violent storm. Like Newton, they too cried out to the Lord, "Save us!" Like Newton, they too were changed forever after their prayer was answered.

Today's Gospel ends its account of the storm at sea, saying about the Apostles: "They were filled with great awe and said to one another: 'Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?'"

This Gospel account of the storm at sea answers the question, "Who is this Man?" "It is Jesus, the Son of God."

But there is more to the story of John Newton. When John left his father's ship, his father was heartbroken. We can imagine his father standing on his deck that night and praying to God in words like these:

"Lord, why did this have to happen? Why doesn't John see that I love him? Lord, even though John has deserted both of us, protect him. Protect him for the two of us."

This tragic scene, or one like it, has repeated itself again and again, in home after home. It is like the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel.

But even if sons -- or daughters -- don't leave home physically, they sometimes leave home spiritually. They part company with their parents when it comes to God or the Church. And this parting can be even more painful than leaving home physically.

When this happens, parents and children should recall with hope the story of the Prodigal Son and the story of John Newton.

In both stories, each son eventually returned home. And in both stories each son returned home a better son than he was when he left. And each son returned home to a better father than the one he left.

The reason both -- father and son -- were better is because, at some point in their separation, they both called out to God for help. That is when both became better people.

Sometimes it takes calling out to God in a storm to discover that our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus, are there and are listening. And then to hear their welcome invitation to come back home again.

Let's close by repeating the words of the hymn that John Newton wrote to celebrate his return home:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found -
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come.
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
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