

Sisters and brothers!

A person looks back at his life and is amazed. There is nothing else but happy amazement: *Amazing Grace*, astonishing, surprising grace. That's the hymn, we've been singing a minute ago. It is the most common and the most popular church hymn ever.

What is the background of this hymn? Why is it so common, so popular? It definitely has to do with the music, which can be sung in a variety of ways, for example sentimentally or soulfully. The origin of the music remains unknown. Maybe an American popular Folksong from the 19th Century. Some people guess, that the music originally came from Afro-American slaves. Another reason for the increase in popularity was the words, the lyrics. The hymn talks to us about the life story of a man, who personally had experienced God's amazing grace: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see". His name is John Newton; he is the writer, the poet of this hymn. His life-story is worth being told. After having heard this story you will sing this hymn in a different way.

John Newton was born on the 24th July 1725 in London. His mother died shortly before his 7th birthday. His father was the captain of a cargo vessel on the Mediterranean Sea and his son was meant to follow in his footsteps and become a sailor as well. After two years, when John was 11 years old, his father took him out of school and John went on his first long journey, followed by six other trips, which always took months.

When he was 19, he was recruited onto a warship from which he deserted, because the conditions of life were unbearable. He was captured again and given a public whipping.

By his own free will he chose to serve on a ship, dealing in the transport of slaves. It brought him to the coast of Sierra Leone. He became the servant of a slave trader who brutally mistreated him. Arriving in Africa, he did not receive any salary. Out of money, he only could survive as a servant in the house of an African woman. There he was given the garbage, the leftovers of the food and he became seriously ill. It was due to the kindness of another captain, who had known John Newton's father, that he was freed from the commitment to the slave boat.

Later, when he was 23 years old, he himself became captain of a boat, dealing in slaves. People were caught in West Africa, loaded on deck of the boat and sold to farmers and planters in America, - if they survived the passage.

Newton was a brutal captain towards the slaves and towards his own crew.

In January 1748 he got into a dangerous storm when he was on his way back home and he was scared to death. And sometimes it is just the way it is: He re-

remembered what his mother had given him to take with him, long ago before she died when he still was a child. It was a short prayer.

So he cried to God: "Lord, have mercy on us!" Years later, he wrote in his diary about this wonder, not having been killed in the most evil storm: "It was a great deliverance!"

He started reflecting on his life. And he started believing that God had been talking to him through this storm. The Amazing Grace of God had started its work with him.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares...
I have already come.
Tis Grace has brought me safe thus far...
and Grace will lead us home.*

The 10th of May 1748 became an important commemoration day for the rest of John Newton's life. It was the day of his conversion, a day of a new beginning. From now on John Newton wanted to lead a life according to God's will.

*T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear...
the hour I first believed.*

In the first instance Newton remained being captain of his boat dealing in slaves. At least he started treating the slaves on his boat as human beings. However, in the end, he quickly began to realize that dealing in slaves was deeply contrary to God's will.

John Newton could not be a slave trader any more.

He learned it from the book "Imitation of Christ", written by Thomas a Kempis, and by meeting the young Methodist movement in England, which was in the forefront of the opposition to slavery. John Newton got to know George Whitefield, a preacher of the Methodist movement and he also got to know John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. From him he learned: "Give freedom, where freedom is due, which means, give freedom to any human being!"

John Newton resigned from being a sailor and slave trader. He started working as a customs officer in Liverpool. In the end, after having overcome some barriers he became a minister of the Church of England and a most convinced enemy of slavery.

It took him a lot of work to convince William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament, that he should start the battle against slavery in the British House of Commons. In the end, he did, and a few months after John Newton had died, Wilberforce won this battle.

Presumably, John Newton wrote his hymn *Amazing Grace* – like other hymns as well – for an ordinary weekly service of his congregation.

When Newton died on 21 December 1807, at the age of 82 years, on his grave stone was written: “John Newton, minister, once faithless and sluttish, dealing in slaves in Africa, was rescued by the rich grace of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, he was made new, he was forgiven and was called to preach the faith he had tried to destroy before!”

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This is a story of conversion as if told by a picture book: Once a faithless sailor, then a minister of the Church of England; once a slave trader, then a convinced enemy of slave trading.

Maybe none of us is able to tell such a spectacular life story – but: I am sure the “the amazing grace” of God, which we confess by singing this hymn, is working in us in different ways and will change each of us and our whole world.

The word “Grace” sometimes has a difficult aftertaste. It sounds like “patronizing” – a lord, who tempers justice with mercy, but who is not forced to do so. Trembling subordinates, who depend on the merciful mood of the boss and who are committed to an everlasting gratefulness and obedience when the boss condescends to be merciful after servile requests. All of that has nothing to do with the biblical meaning of “Grace”

God’s grace is a reality in our life, we cannot fall out of – even if we live in a very different way and rebel against it.

God’s grace is always ahead of our life and our acting. God’s grace is always there before we create or do something. God’s grace is more important than our merit and bigger than our human error. God’s grace was there, “before I was born”, as we sing in a German Christmas hymn. God’s grace sustains me in all functions I fulfill.

Through his grace God communicates with me, he gives what he is: Love, happiness, justice – however we might refer to it.

The first image of man in the bible is not the fighter, not the worker, not the man who performs his merits. The first image of man in the bible is the exceptionally gifted human being: Adam in the garden surrounded by so many presents, that a life’s time will not be enough to unwrap them. So many words of love, spoken by God, in the ear, that our ears are too deaf to absorb them. God’s grace is the constant YES, the Yes to my life, whether it is a whole one or a fragment.

Whether we listen to the YES or not, whether we answer and engage – God’s YES is always present.

Grace means there is a free space for my life, and not only for me but for the lives of all people. John Newton realized it very late, but not too late.

Grace is God's space, where I can breathe again; walk and move again, laugh, cry and act again. Paul Tillich, a German theologian, said that "Grace has the form of a 'nevertheless'".

Grace means that we can live and shall live although there is separation and alienation, although there is guilt and failure, although there are limitations we cannot overcome. The life of Jesus Christ was filled with this grace, but he did not hold on to it as only his privilege.

Talking about grace always means that we also have to talk about the merciless reality that surrounds us and which we often share and support.

We are living and working in many areas, where grace as a free space or a shelter does not exist. Where there is only functioning, be it at school, in the family, at work, grace is far away

Grace is far away, when there is no hiding place like under the stairs in old houses. Grace is far away, when we are not able to retire for some time, when there is no space at school without marks. Grace is far away, when our personal needs are irrelevant in our workplace, when the family is nothing more than a control system, which does not allow small escapes or our own ideas and projects. Grace is far away, when economy is just another word for profit and not at the same time a word for skills and the love to develop new ideas.

Grace is far away when church does not accept different lifestyles as adequate. Therefore, wherever one of these examples is found, grace is a homeless stranger.

As long as we are talking about grace without creating a free space for it in our lives, where it can grow and free people, it is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called a "cheap grace," a grace without discipleship, without the cross, a grace without Jesus Christ, the source of grace.

As soon as we live in God's grace, grace is mirrored in our faces, by the work of our hands, by the gentleness of the words we speak.

Our protest against unbearable conditions of life, where people lose their dignity, mirrors God's grace. Most of the time grace has a price. William Wilberforce, who supported John Newton in fighting against slavery in Great Britain, accepted that this might have the consequence of losing his position as a Member of Parliament. He became a mirror of Jesus Christ who accepted the price of losing his life by breaking through the merciless world and creating a free space for us.

Grace has nothing to do with patronizing people who are in need of grace.

Grace is the center of our faith. Grace allows people to breathe again, to walk and to move again, to love, cry and act again, without feeling humiliated.

The origin of grace lies in the mystery of God and it moves through our hearts into the midst of the world.

It is important to talk about this grace, to confess it in our own words. Maybe it is more adequate to sing about this grace again and again, be it in new and old hymns, be it with a high or a low voice, be it beautiful or not, be it in a solo part or in a choir, classical or modern, however...

Anyway, the best is, God's grace moves our hands and our hearts and transforms into care for the one who is next to us right now.