

SEA SUNDAY 2020

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in America and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement, there have been many demands that the statues and memorials of people associated with the slave trade should be torn down and removed, and their memories erased from public consciousness.

And Liverpool, which was the capital of slave trading in Britain, has not escaped, with street names such as Penny Lane being defaced. At the height of the Slave Trade one in five captives crossing the Atlantic were carried in a Liverpool slave ship, and 40% of the city's income derived from the slave trade.

It is something Liverpool has not tried to hide or deny, as the establishment of the International Slavery Museum testifies. Acknowledging the past we seek to learn from its mistakes. And now with the high profile involvement of the premier league teams we hope and pray that discrimination and racism can be resigned to the pages of the history books.

And associated with Liverpool as a great maritime and trading port, our own Formby coastline has witnessed many shipwrecks over the years, some of which can still be seen embedded in the sand. And indeed many of those who died in these shipwrecks are buried in St. Peter's churchyard.

Slavery and Shipwreck – come together on this Sea Sunday as we think about the writer of our next hymn – Amazing Grace. For its author, John Newton, was the captain of a slave trader, plying his trade between Africa and the West Indies and Britain in the 18th century.

Newton's life as a sailor began when he was 11 – not by choice, although his father was a sailor – but being press-ganged into the navy, a not too uncommon event in those days.

Newton did desert from the Navy but was captured and endured a severe flogging for being absent without leave.

It didn't put him off a life at sea, for he later transferred to the Merchant Navy, eventually captaining his own ship and carrying goods from England to Africa and the West Indies and slaves back on the return journey.

At that stage in his life, according to himself, he was without God and without morals. On his epitaph he describes himself as "John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of the slaves in Africa...."

A servant of the slaves? Yes, even that. At one stage he sold himself to a black woman who, it is said, kept him under her table and fed him with crusts like a dog!

So, how did the transition from vice to vicar come about?

A bit like Paul in our epistle this morning, John Newton was caught in a very severe storm at sea. His ship was taking in water at a ferocious rate and was in danger of sinking.

For 9 hours Newton and his crew plied the pumps trying to keep the vessel afloat. At one point he was so desperate he shouted, "If this will not do, then the Lord have mercy upon us."

Then his mind jolted! Who was he to ask for mercy? How could there be mercy for someone who had so little mercy or regard for others, not least for his galley full of slaves. It wasn't a time for philosophising. He was fighting to save his ship, but he found himself again and again crying out to God to save him.

He was more fortunate than the captain of the ship Paul was sailing in. For while the crew of Paul's boat survived, the vessel was broken to pieces by the force of the waves.

In Newton's case both the ship and the crew and the slaves in the hold all survived.

And unlike many before and since, John Newton, once safe, didn't forget his prayers and promises to God. He turned to God, changed his ways, forsook the slave trade and eventually offered himself to be ordained, a journey that took 9 years to complete.

During his ministry, he never hid his past life and never tired of telling people of the great change in his life that had been brought about God's amazing grace that had "saved a wretch like me."

After 16 years as a curate in Olney in Buckinghamshire where he wrote many of his hymns, he was appointed to St. Mary's, Woolnoth in London.

He became a celebrated pastor and preacher in London and spent the rest of his years in St. Mary's. But just before he died in 1807, at the age of 82, he said to a friend, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two great things – that I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great Saviour."

Our hymnbook has five of his hymns, among them such favourites as "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds" and "Glorious things of thee are spoken".

I hope, unlike the statues that have been removed, that his hymns will not be erased because of his connection with the slave trade of a former age.

Yes, terrible things happened of which we rightly repent and react against today. But surely, it is important that as we learn *about* atrocities like the slave trade, that we also learn *from* them. And keeping these monuments and sites – like the concentration camps of Poland - let them serve as a reminder and a warning against ever letting such injustices happen again.

Still today, "many go down to the sea in ships". We rely on the tankers bringing food and goods but many of those who work on these huge container ships have a very difficult life. Often months away from their families, paid below the minimum wage with little job security. Having to spend what little free time they have in foreign ports among strangers.

Recent research by the World Health Organisation suggests that seafarers are an at risk group because of the loneliness and isolation they experience – most ships have small crews who may not always speak the same language – and they have very little time for rest and relaxation.

The Mission to Seafarers amongst others do crucial work to help the marginalised and hidden needs of today's seafarers.

So, it's right that we should have a special Sunday to acknowledge and remember with gratitude all who serve on the sea.

This Sea Sunday, we especially give thanks for the transformation that took place in the life of John Newton, something which underlines so vividly the message of Jesus that no one is beyond redemption, and that even those who are lost, can, by God's grace, be found and restored. A strong reminder that none of us are beyond God's love. And none of us are beyond being able to serve God and bring about a better world.