

Amazing Grace

Sunday 4, February 2018

Introduction

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Kia ora everyone, it's great to with you.

This morning, I want to unfold a journey I've been on. It started by asking myself the question what stirred nations to stop human suffering?

To start the journey, I begun reading real-life stories, starting with Martin Luther King Jr, a man I deeply admire.

Suffering is something Dr King heard and witnessed everyday in his own family, In his letter From Birmingham Jail to religious leaders he explaining the injustice by writing. *"When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people;"*

It is very understandable that he would fight for justice for family, friends and community all his life.

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Reading his fascinating life story, I realised that nations are stirred by great spokespeople or leaders (often God fearing Christians). These people impassion others and start movements, that make passive people aware of injustice, until public outcry is so great that the injustice is stopped.

But the question came to me - has anyone in history ever been so stirred by suffering that wasn't in their neighbourhood?

This lead me to William Wilberforce.

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William Wilberforce is a name many of you are familiar with, what did he do?

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Included in his list of achievements are. (read slide)

As you've mentioned he had a life-long devotion to the cause of abolishing the African Slave Trade, and then the abolition of slavery itself.

At the time he started his anti-slavery legislation, Britain was responsible for the transportation of 3.5 million African slaves, a third of all slaves transported across the Atlantic. It is estimated that 40% of the British economy was based on the slave trade.

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Wilberforce said "Before this great cause all others dwindle in my eyes. If it please God to honor me so far, may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as has never before disgraced a Christian country."

It is very apparent reading any historical records of William Wilberforce, he had a deep love for Jesus and relied on His grace. Wilberforce was assured of his salvation, in a principle called 'justification by faith'. The basis for which, purely by grace, apart from works, we have salvation.

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This is a truth the Apostle Paul touches on in his letter to the churches of Galatia, but later expands on in a letter he sent to a church in Rome.

The letter to the Romans is in effect Paul's very own 'Case for Christ', it is a very logical letter, that clearly displays the gospel, including the truth of 'justification by faith', while also defeating every argument against it.

Faith

Romans is consistent with the message of the whole bible, that God is infinitely loving, merciful and perfectly Just. Starting with Abraham, God makes a promise for those who come to him by faith. What is faith? Abraham believed God, that he and his wife would have a son in their old age.

Let's look at more recent stories of faith in our history. This first one is a story I've adapted from "Thoughts to make your heart sing" by Sally Lloyd Jones and Jago.

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Faith is believing what God says.

Some people think faith is like a taking a leap in the dark, that faith is blind.

But the Bible says it's the opposite. Away from God we are in the dark, that's when we are blind and stumbling around.

Story of John Newton

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A good example of someone of someone stumbling around in the dark is John Newton, mentor of Wilberforce.

John Newton was a notorious slave trader - but one night while out at sea, he woke up because of a fierce storm. He came out to see his crew mates getting completely tossed about, and didn't know if he was going to live or die. 'He cried out to God' and instead of cursing God, something he was famously known for, he cried out for help, both for salvation and that God would bring his ship to safety. For hours the storm raged until they managed to navigate the ship to shore.

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However he marked this day as the start of his "Great Turning Point". Speaking about his inner turmoil and the state of his heart years later, he said it was the glimmer of "light" on a very dark window.

Coming to know Jesus changed John Newton forever. He spent the rest of his life being a pastor, working to free slaves and also wrote the song "Amazing Grace": "I was blind", he sang, but now I see!"

When we come home to God it is not a leap into darkness. It is magnificent leap into light - the light of God's love for us!

Story of William Wilberforce

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William Wilberforce, also made this leap into light. William came to know Jesus, during a period in his life he called his “Great Change”.

Once he became a Christian, he wrestled with his faith and his work. He felt deep guilt for wasted time and opportunities.

Early in his Christian life Wilberforce wondered how he could still please God and remain in the dirty business of politics, as he longed to be a pastor. To resolve the anguish he felt over what to do with his life as a Christian, he sought counsel from John Newton.

He met John on December 7, 1785, possibly the first time, since he attended his church as a youngster.

William said that he had "ten thousand doubts" about going to see him, and walked twice around the block before he could get up the courage to knock on his door. To his amazement the sixty year old Newton urged him not to cut himself off from public life.

As recommended by Newton, he stayed in politics, but also developed such a passion for the bible, he would study the bible several hours a day, especially while parliament was in recess.

I wonder if any of our politicians are doing this today?

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Two years after his conversion God's apparent calling on his life had become clear to him. On October 28, 1787, he wrote in his diary, "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of manners (morals)."

How are we made right with God?

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Justification means to be made right with God.

Justified comes from a legal term, that describes a verdict. The defendant is no longer “the accused” they either become “guilty” or “innocent”. The person justified is described as “righteous”, regardless of if their nature has changed.

As Newtown, Wilberforce and even the Apostle Paul witnessed by their own experiences - we are all guilty by God's standards, all humanity is trapped in sin and needs to be rescued.

The promise that Abraham received, was not just for him, but for us who believe 'God raised Jesus from the dead' Paul says.

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Isaiah 53:11 tells us "*After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities*"

Jesus is the rescuer. Salvation can't be attained by human effort, and therefore we can't claim it. It is by grace, the wholly undeserved favour of God.

Why was this so important to Wilberforce?

What changes when we are made right with God.

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What changes when we are made right with God? Let's read Romans 5:1-3

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access [entrance] by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast [rejoice] in the hope of the glory of God.

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When we are made right with God he gives us a new status, new family, and new future.

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New Status

He takes care of our past. *Romans 5:1* says 'We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'. He will no longer hold our sins against us.

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New Family

He brings us into His family. *Romans 5:2 says 'Through whom we have gained access [entrance] by faith into this grace in which we now stand'* We can come to Jesus any time for the help we need. It doesn't matter how worthy or unworthy we feel. *The child of a king can enter his father's presence no matter how the child looks.*

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New Future

We are given a new future. That one day we shall share in His glory! Romans 5:2 continues with "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God".

The Death and resurrection of Jesus has given us a new standing before God. We have life. We have peace. We have hope. We have the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Christ Died for us; Christ lives for us; Christ is coming for us!

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What about suffering?

Romans goes on in 3-5 with the idea that we are to '*glory in our sufferings*'.

3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Wilberforce suffered, and had to persevere through great trials, many times his abolition bills failed to get the required votes in the house.

He also suffered many health problems, and later these these became debilitating.

Three days before William Wilberforce died, July 26 1833 a bill was passed for the complete abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies.

“Thank God”, he said, that I should have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give 20,000,000 pounds for the Abolition of Slavery.”

This 20 million pounds was a sum set aside to essentially purchase the freedom for roughly 800,000 slaves.

Despite his suffering in many forms he managed to stop the future suffering of millions.

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Philip Yancey also brings some interesting thoughts on the subject of suffering..

When Jesus faced pain, he responded in much the same way we do. He did not pray in the garden, “Oh, Lord, I am so grateful that you have chosen me to suffer on your behalf. I rejoice in the privilege!” No, he experienced sorrow, fear, abandonment, and something approaching desperation. Still, he endured because he knew that at the center of the universe lived his Father, a God of love he could trust regardless of how things appeared at the time.

The Jesus I Never Knew ~ Philip Yancey

Wilberforce loved Paul’s letters, so one thing I am sure of, is that in his deepest suffering, he would of read this very verse and got immense comfort from it.

The Bible and the Treaty

The stories of Wilberforce, and stories of faith have relevance to New Zealand's history.

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As we prepare to commemorate the Treaty of Waitangi, this Tuesday, Waitangi Day. Our stories today provide a vital foundation.

Later in his life Wilberforce lived in a community in Clapham.

The Clapham community was developed by a wealthy banker who dreamed of developing a christian community. The dream became reality and from the 1790’s onwards, Clapham became a vibrant community, with families living out of each other’s homes, daily prayers, and collaborative projects developed over the kitchen table. At its core were six families.

Incredibly, the influence this group had on the 18th and 19th century in England was significant. It was more than just Wilberforce, more than defeating slavery, more than building good morals,

It was radical Christianity. it was a community of people - a group of ordinary churchgoers, ministers, business people and politicians doing life together. They simply prayed and laboured in what God called them to do.

The Claphamites, established one of the first Missionary Societies. The CMS (Church Missionary Society).

New Zealand was a place they felt an urgency to send missionaries, and many of the early missionaries we remember today were sent from the CMS, including Samuel Marsden, Henry Williams, and his younger brother William Williams, and many others.

The CMS started sending missionaries with practical skills such as building and farming. They believed this was the best way to introduce the gospel.

Quoting Keith Newman in the Bible and the Treaty 'They were exhausted in their efforts to share their faith, practical knowledge and serve a people in a distant land.'

'For over forty years, dozens of European missionaries generally stood firm like guardians, concerned for the welfare of Maori and against injustice, rivalled in their passion only by the scores of Maori who brought the message of transformation to their own people.'

This Clapham community was determined that the British would improve the treatment of indigenous people in the colonies, including in the Pacific.

James Stephen Jr, one of the next generation of Claphamites (said to be the new Wilberforce) was initially opposed to colonisation of NZ, but saw the lawless nature of individual's seeing NZ as a 'land grab', and sent royal instructions for William Hobson to use pre-existing missionary relationships with Maori to enter into treaty arrangements to secure NZ's future.

On 6 February 1840, as the chiefs came forward to sign Hobson greeted each of them with the words 'He iwi tahi tatou' (We are all one people).

However the unity was short lived as, and you can imagine the heart wrenching pain of betrayal, as both the Maori and the missionaries realised the Treaty wasn't going to be honoured.

Keith Newman

The "high-minded" social reformers of the Clapham who set out the example for Maori to have a full say in what happened to their country before colonisation gained any real momentum, would have been horrified at what eventually played out.

The Treaty of Waitangi wasn't to be a great victory like the Abolition of slavery, but the missionaries were good people (as we read by the way they treated all people with love and respect), many of their names, stories and commitment we were never know.

I would like us to honor today the many missionary that came to give the good news (rongopai) to Aotearoa. These brave, committed and generous families who speak to us through the pages of history. Today we honour their lives.

To honour these people and to conclude our service, I'd like us to sing Amazing Grace and Wairu Tapu (Welcome Holy Spirit).

Newton, New years day 1773, said to his congregation - Where were you when Lord found you?
I was a wretch.

This was the first time Amazing Grace was sung, it has been sung many many since, especially at times of reconciliation, significant events in history, including at King's March on Washington.

Let's sing it today. We live by the grace of God. God Bless you.