



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 13:44-52  
Second Reading Revelation 19:1,4-9  
Gospel John 13:31-35

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This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in England. An alliance of evangelical and high churchmen after many years campaigning finally persuaded the government to abolish this terrible trade. Well that's the history headline. The facts are slightly different. It took another thirty years of campaigning before slavery was abolished in the rest of the British Empire and for existing slaves to be freed and their children not to automatically belong to their parent's owner. You see the abolition of slavery was not a one off event. It was a part of a process.

During communion, we will sing or listen to the well known hymn Amazing Grace. Some of you will know the story of the author John Newton. He was the captain of a slave ship. During a heavy storm when the ship was in danger of sinking, he said the Lords Prayer. The ship did not sink and he became a Christian. Again so the headline history tells us. Yes, it's true. On the return journey to England John Newton started

to read the Bible. He took a number of shore based jobs but all connected with the sea. He still remained involved and profited from the slave trade. Yes, it's also true. I was shocked at first when I discovered this and vowed never to sing Amazing Grace again. I delved deeper into slavery and John Newton's life. Eventually he did give up his connections with slavery and became an Anglican priest but before he did this, he finally denounced slavery and became a campaigner for the abolition of slavery.

What I respect now about the man is his own words in which he admits that his true conversion was not until he realized how vile this trade was. His reason was simple. The commandment we have heard in today's gospel to love one another. He had excused his behavior by saying well I am only the captain of the ship. I carry what the owners tell me. I am not responsible for the cargo. Well he had the courage to admit that his early Christian life had been a sham. Only when he got right with his fellow men did he get right with God. Again, Newtons conversion was a process. How many of us have or still do compromise our faith? It is all so easy to behave in a way that goes against the commandment to love one another and to compromise our faith and our freedom. My initial reaction was to point a finger at John Newton. Then I began to consider how many times I have not lived up to the commandment.

Of course, slavery has not ended in the world or even in England. The trafficking of women for the sex trade men women and children still work as pressed labour in appalling conditions in factories and plantations. They may not be transported in three masted sailing ships but in container ships lorries and planes. A couple of years ago a container lorry was searched by police in England. They found I think 18 dead Chinese people. The air pipe in the container was blocked. Yes, slavery is alive and kicking.

How many of us here today are slaves? Are there any slave traders here today? Many people in this country receive their salary and by the time they have paid off their mortgage bank loan credit card pawn shop or money lender have little or nothing left for themselves. Are you a modern slave to debt? You may not be shackled in leg irons but you may as well be for the amount of freedom you have. Whole countries can become slaves to debt as they struggle to pay off loans and much needed schools hospital roads and bridges are not built. We do not need to look very far for an example of this. If you employ staff, how do you treat them? Are they paid and cared for in a just way or are they given short term contracts so that they can never gain the full benefits of permanent employment and so become slaves to poverty uncertainty and sickness.

People can be slaves to their past. An abused childhood a broken marital relationship a traumatic event suffered in war or a business failure. Alcohol drugs and gambling drag many into the misery of slavery. Even events that happen in church can enslave people to unbelief or cast them out in to the desert where the slave is on his own with nothing ready to fall pray to the hungry wolf that roams in the desert waiting for the outcast. Do not leave the Church. This is where the slave can find true freedom.

However, as with John Newton there is hope. It may take time but there is hope. Newton was both a slave and a slave master. He was only truly free when he put away finally the evil that he had been involved in when he truly repented and turned away.

Psalm 145 talks about hope. "The Lord is good to all. He has compassion and mercy on all he has made." The important word is ALL. In the reading from the Book of

Revelation, we hear of a new Heaven and a new earth a New Jerusalem in which the old order has passed away and pain suffering and grief have passed away. It is our job as Christian people to be the sign or signal of this new order. To try to show in our lives not just in church but also in all the communities in which we move that slavery pain and suffering can be overcome and that there is an alternative to slavery and suffering.

It is not acceptable to see those in slavery and remind them that if they can just accept their suffering in this life that they will be rewarded in the world to come. Jesus came to establish his Kingdom of justice and righteousness in our lives and the lives of all. In this season of Easter, we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. However, how did his disciples and his followers know that they had met the risen Jesus? They knew because he carried with him the marks of the crucifixion. The marks of the nails and the pierced side. His past had not been magicked away or covered with vanishing cream. That past had been redeemed by love but the scars still showed. Jesus tells his disciples to love one another so that that love will be a sign to all of the nature of the Kingdom of God.

The problem John Newton had when his ship was in danger was that in his version of the Lords Prayer he was saying My father who art in heaven. Give me this day my daily bread. If you look closely at the hymn, you will see that for the first verses all is about me and I. It is only in the final verse that the hymn talks about we. Let me tell you a little secret. John Newton did not write that verse. It was written by Harriett Beecher Stowe who wrote Uncle Toms Cabin. She was an American lady who worked hard for the abolition of slavery in America.

It is only when we come to be able to truly say OUR Father that we can understand the nature of the suffering of the cross and the call that Jesus makes to love one another. Just as Jesus was recognized by his scars, so we will be recognized by our scars. Our past is not magicked away when Jesus comes to us but they are transformed when we realize that God is in all of those we meet and have dealings with. John Newton was set free when he realized that he had dealt cruelly with those whom God had commanded him to love. If we are to be set free from our own slavery, we have to set free those whom we have bound into slavery ourselves.