

03/30/14 4 Lent A

-- John Newton may not be a household name to many of us, but one of his songs probably is. Newton wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, which is still used in Christian Churches all over the world.

-- Newton was born in England in 1725. His mother, who was really the only early religious influence on him, died when he was young. He went to sea with his father. He had a rough life there, and he became an angry young man who took advantage of others, living a wild lifestyle.

-- While still young he served on a slave trade ship. In 1748, his ship got caught in a bad storm. That storm moved him to pray and to begin a conversion of life. But his conversion didn't happen overnight.

-- For several years he continued to work on slave ships, though he treated people better. He got married, and finally left the slave trade in 1755. He began to teach himself Greek and Hebrew, and eventually applied for ordination in the Anglican Church.

-- He was 38 years old by the time he was accepted to be a pastor. His preaching began to attract crowds and he began to write hymns. *Amazing Grace* tells of his conversion, using the famous line *I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see*.

-- Newton had been blind to what his lifestyle was doing to him as a young man. In particular, he was blind to the evils of the slave trade. Only gradually were his eyes opened, and eventually he became active in the movement to abolish slavery.

-- Our gospel tells the story of a man blind from birth whom Jesus healed. At first, he was healed from physical blindness. But, as the story goes on, he began to see others things more clearly. He saw clearly how God loved him. He realized that Jesus was more than a healer. In the end, he acknowledged him as the Lord of life.

-- The gospel contrasts his attitude with that of the religious authorities who refused to admit what was right in front of them. This healing can't

be real; Jesus did this on the Sabbath! He's not a part of our "religious circle." Maybe this man wasn't really blind from birth.

-- All their excuses were swept away by the simple testimony of this man: *I was blind, but now I see*. They simply couldn't accept someone who would put his faith in Jesus.

-- This story of conversion is telescoped into about 40 verses of John's gospel. More often, though, conversion to Christ occurs more like it did with John Newton. Though a significant event began his conversion, it was worked out over years. That is what happens in so many cases.

-- This reminds us that we are all called to a continuing conversion of mind and heart. We are challenged to allow the Lord to strip away those things that blind us to God's work, be they grudges against people who've hurt us, prejudices, or hardened ideas of how things should be.

-- We continue to pray for our catechumens and candidates working on their conversion of heart as they prepare for the Easter sacraments. We ask that God will wipe away any blindness in their hearts and in ours.

-- John Newton had no trouble seeing, but he was blind to the damage his lifestyle was bringing him. He was blind to the evil of slavery (which, by the way, still exists in our day, notably in human trafficking).

-- The Lord opened his eyes over time to see in an entirely new way. May he continue to open our eyes to the ways we all need continuing conversion to the way of the Lord.