

## **Amazing Grace Simon Says Summer 2007**

Writing my last magazine article as Vicar has been a lot harder than I thought it would be. I think I feel the pressure of wanting to say something memorable and profound, and on that count I have failed! I think it is also the desire to “leave well”, in other words, with everything in order and in tact to hand on to a successor. That is not completely achievable both because we step off a moving boat allowing the river to gush on with someone else at the helm. Life goes on for us and for St Luke’s. But at the same time, we say a sad and fond goodbye to the congregation we have been with for eight and half years.

As we have been preparing to pack up, I have been most struck by the new biography of John Newton written by Jonathan Aitken. At the launch of his book last month, I was heartened to hear from Jonathan that he learnt his love of John Newton during the year he spent at Wycliffe Hall after leaving prison. I am sure that the title “From Disgrace to Amazing Grace” is as much autobiographical as it is biography!

John Newton was a notorious sinner. He was engaged in the slave trade, living an ill-disciplined and ungodly lifestyle. He was wonderfully saved and eventually accepted for ordained ministry in the Church of England. He is best known as the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”. But in this bicentenary anniversary we remember that Newton had a profound impact on William Wilberforce. Aren’t we glad he persuaded Wilberforce to remain as a Government minister rather than put himself forward for ordination? Later Newton would work closely with him towards the eventual abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

But John Newton was also a successful parish Vicar leading the parishes of Olney in Buckinghamshire and St Mary’s Woolnoth, London, to substantial growth. As I have read his biography I have been struck by his decision to move on from the village of Olney to London in 1779. He loved the people of Olney and worked hard for their spiritual welfare. However it was his wider work in writing, speaking and the Eclectics society that eventually drew him away. He wrote in his diary on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1780:

This evening service is to terminate my connection with Olney. O give me a heart to praise thee for the years of mercies I have known in this place – provision, protection, support, acceptance and I hope usefulness. If we had trials, comforts have more abounded.

I have never had an “career plan” for my ordained life. I think I would have stayed working for Natwest bank if I had wanted a career path! I have also never thought in terms of “strategic” parishes or positions. However, I guess in a small way like John Newton, we do feel that God has pulled us out of this work to move us onto something else.

### **Deciding to move on is hard**

Eight and a half years is a long time to be in one place, so leaving is hard. But the decision to leave parish life wasn’t taken easily either. We did not go looking for this job. The change from parish vicar to teacher and vice Principal of a theological college will be a huge adjustment for us all. Making such decisions is not easy. However, change is good – for us all I think. A lot has changed since I arrived here at St Luke’s for us and for the church family.

Looking back at the photos of our family on the first Sunday I arrived in January 1999, you will note the Vicar’s black hair and youthful looks! Jake was a babe in arms and the girls both in early years at Bishop Gilpin. Carrie, of course, doesn’t look a day older.

St Luke's has changed a lot too. Change happens slowly, but over the years it alters the flavour of the congregation. People move away, new ones arrive; older folks die and lots and lots of babies are born!

My own work has changed too. I have continued to devote most of my working week to St Luke's. Leading a staff team in recent years has been a privilege and joy. Sunday preparations, training, leading committee meetings, and meeting with small groups and individuals has taken up the majority of my time. Increasingly, however I have also had roles on committees in the Anglican scene. I have taught in different parts of the world and spent some time writing. As I have been more pulled into the latter part of this work it has made sense to step out of parish life and be more involved in the training of future generations of Church leaders.

### **Getting an accurate picture of what we have achieved is not possible**

In many respects I don't feel ready or able to do a review of what has happened at St Luke's over the last 8 years. I certainly don't feel as though the work is done here at St Luke's. We are not leaving because we think that the task is complete. But along with you, we pray for the right successor to take the work forward.

Some obvious encouragements include

- Modest growth. In recent years St Luke's has grown. People have been added to the Church through evangelistic events, playgroup, Christianity Explored/Alpha courses plus Early Bird, then more recently the successfully relaunched 6.30pm service.
- An ongoing commitment to reach all ages. St Luke's retains a "family feel" and despite the strongly felt absences of many of the older members who have gone to meet our maker, we see most age-groups represented. I am pleased that the three most recent ventures have reflected that. The Play Group continues to be a great first point of contact for young mums. The monthly Seniors luncheon continues to grow in number providing a ministry to many in the parish and beyond. And the evening service, though modest in size, continues to grow and attracts young professionals and others in the area. All of these things add to the "Church family feel" which is very evident at St Luke's. We will need to work even harder at maintaining this as the congregation continues to grow.
- Structures for growth have included adopting a PCC statement, which helps people see how we apply the bible to key areas of church life. We are 4 years through a 5 year plan (to grow deeper in our love for one another, wider in our outreach and higher in our worship). We have greatly benefited from a good staff team which has enhanced the work amongst young people, in music, pastoral care and the smooth running of the Church. We also have good wardens and a solid PCC.
- St Luke's has a future. Of course this is not guaranteed. A Church cannot stand still. But recent events such as the Eternity Mission and "You Cannot be Serious" help remind us that there is a world on our doorstep which needs to be won with the Gospel and that people still respond positively when the Gospel is clearly explained and applied.

I am reminded most of all that God is the judge of success in ministry. Have you noticed how he more often than not hides our greatest achievements and our greatest failures from us. I am sure that that is good for us – it helps us ensure that we give all glory to him; that we pray consistently and we are kept from complacency

### **We may look forward confident of God's provision**

My new role at Wycliffe will involve three main things. I shall teach the core homiletics (preaching) course. I will share in the leadership and management of Wycliffe Hall along with Richard Turnbull,

the Principal. I shall be involved in setting up a school of preaching which will help strengthen preaching across the curriculum and, hopefully in due course, in churches up and down our land.

Wycliffe itself is going through huge changes which have hit the national press. These are largely down to two main things: the first is a shift in emphasis from an isolated academic institution to one which focuses more particularly on training and equipping men and women for future ministry. Academic standards will remain very high and the associations with Oxford university will continue, but the hope is that the students will be better equipped for ministry as a result of these changes. The second challenge has to do with the way in which change has been managed and the desire to bring an institution under a central strategic vision. This has been painful, but very necessary. Please pray for these ongoing changes!

From a family point of view, we shall be looking to join a local church as congregation members! Whilst I will have some Sunday responsibilities, we shall be able to worship together as a family quite often. The girls will come back home from Kingham School at weekends. Jake will be going to a mainstream school with a language unit attached, in Abingdon. Carrie will be a home maker initially, but will look for some work in due course. Again, prayer for these huge adjustments to family life will be much appreciated.

Finally, it is good to be leaving St Luke's confident in the leadership of David and the rest of the staff team and with two great wardens who play a critical part in the selection of a new Vicar (so pray for Gareth and Cathy in this role); plus a PCC and team of able people who are committed to seeing St Luke's grow deeper, wider and higher.

Thank you for all your love and partnership over the last eight and half years. We are going to miss you all lots!

God's grace is indeed amazing! What a gift John Newton has been to the Church – through that marvellously inspired hymn and through his critical influence on the course of human history, not least through his friendship with William Wilberforce turning a Slave Trader into a valuable slave of God - he teaches us much about the God of grace:

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sounds,  
That saved a wretch like me,  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now, I see*

*'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear  
And Grace, my fears relieved.  
How precious did that Grace appear  
The house I first believed.*

Yours in his amazing grace

Simon

PS our new address from July 23<sup>rd</sup>  
20 Bickerton Road, Oxford OX3 7LS  
01865 765909

[Simonvib@aol.com](mailto:Simonvib@aol.com); [Carolinevibert@aol.com](mailto:Carolinevibert@aol.com)