

'The wrinkle is that John Newton wrote 'Amazing Grace' before he gave up slaving. He wrote it under the impression that he had already seen the stuff he should be worrying about - booze and licentiousness, presumably, and playing tiddly-winks on the Sabbath, and not running his slave ship with a swear-box screwed to the mast.'

Francis Spufford, writer

'People cannot forgive what they cannot punish.'

Hannah Arendt, philosopher

'Even psychiatrists who are not religious would still regard helping people to forgive and to accept that they are forgiven as important... it is of great value. Forgiving oneself is particularly difficult.'

Andrew Sims, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry

It was only when I read Newton's autobiography, many years later, that I began to see that later Christians had done some finessing of the chronology. Newton's own account reveals that the first Christian services he led were on the deck of his slaving vessel - presumably with people in chains in the hold below the worshippers' feet!

How could Newton not have realised? How could he not have heard the dissonance, smelt the rot? This makes me wonder in dread what we are missing now, that will appal future generations. What will they think of our blind acceptance of the free market, for example? Our throwaway culture? The gulf between rich and poor? Of our failure to listen to the voice of the prophets warning of the coming disaster? Perhaps you heard young climate activist Greta Thunberg's words at the 2019 Climate Action Summit? 'This is all wrong... You come to us young people for hope. How dare you?... All you can talk about is money, and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.'

Is our world going to hell in a handcart? Some strands of Christian thought say yes, and (fuelled by a particular reading of the Book of Revelation) that this is a *good* thing. It means that Christ's Second Coming is not far away, and believers will be whisked out of the mess by the Rapture. Other Christians disagree. God's Kingdom, God's will, is worked out *on earth* as it is in heaven. Therefore the plight of the poor, the state of our oceans and forests are Kingdom matters.

May we be forgiven

I've been a Christian for decades now. I have a reasonable awareness of my personal sins and failings. I know how to repent and cast myself on the kindness of God, and to apologise and seek reconciliation at a personal level (even if my record is patchy). I can take responsibility. But how can I repent of the vast networks of evil that I'm enmeshed in - especially the ones I can't even see yet? What kind of responsibility do I have?

This is the kind of thing that keeps me awake in the wee small hours. I find myself thrown back on the Anglican prayer that says, 'You see we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves' and asks for mercy (Lent 2 in Book of Common Prayer and Common

'Forgiveness is a frequently misunderstood phenomenon, often interpreted as the experience of sentimental warm feelings towards the offending party and a willingness to restore a relationship to its original intimacy. Not only is this psychologically implausible in many cases, it can also offer a dangerous invitation to the offender to hurt the victim another time. Preaching that insists upon 'forgiveness' in these terms has forced many victims of domestic violence to remain in the marital home, for example.'

Revd Dr Helen Paynter

'There's only one real sin, and that it to persuade oneself that the second-best is anything but the second-best.'

Doris Lessing, writer

Worship). We are rightly afraid, for these structures are very powerful and we are very small. Like Isaiah, we need that angel to fly from the altar with a burning coal, touch our lips, and take our guilt away. (Isaiah 6.6-7.) John Newton, elderly and confused on his deathbed, found that all he could remember was this: 'I am a very great sinner, and Christ is a very great saviour.' I hold onto this.

Like Isaiah, we aren't touched with the fire of forgiveness simply for our own personal wellbeing, so that we can roll over and go back to sleep at 3 a.m. The next thing for Isaiah was a chance to hear God's own internal debate: '*Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?*' We are forgiven in order that we may volunteer: '*Here I am. Send me.*' (Isaiah 6.8.)

What are we to do?

Yes, but to do what? What can I do in the face of all this? The enormity of the challenge overwhelms me, and the temptation to stick my fingers in my ears and sing 'La La La' is strong. I'm comforted by some wise words of former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams: 'You don't have to make every kind of difference. But you do have to make the difference that only you can.'

I said earlier that I no longer believe in hell as a literal place of endless torment. I would gladly embrace the idea of heaven for all, were it not for the teaching of Jesus about two destinies. Wise virgin/foolish virgin; sheep/goat; Dives/Lazarus. And this brings back my childhood dread of being a goat without realising it. I was very heartened when I realised that Elizabethan poet and priest John Donne wasn't immune here either: 'I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun/My last thread, I shall perish on the shore.'

I don't know about you, but I struggle to sing the whole of the grand old Wesley hymn *And can it be?* I tend to mumble, 'Bold I approach the eternal throne'. But if I look to Jesus, not at myself, faith is possible. Because when I look to Jesus, I find myself thinking, 'If he calls me, I will drop everything and run into his arms.'