

AMAZING GRACE – An Introduction to the Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity: with particular reference to racial justice.

‘Amazing Grace’ – perhaps one of the most universally known Gospel Songs and if I were to ask, who was the author of the words of Amazing Grace, many people would say immediately, John Newton; but if I ask about the composer of the tune, then there would probably be a debate and the most common answer is usually ‘Unknown’.

Some years ago, I came across a piece by an American Gospel Singer, Wintley Phipps, who pointed out that the melody of Amazing Grace was one of a relatively limited number of tunes that could be played solely on the black notes of a piano. He went on to say that the ‘black notes scale’ (the pentatonic scale) is used repeatedly in the melodies of West Africa and they are used especially in their ‘sorrow chants’, their songs of lament.

Phipps argued, therefore, that it’s possible that John Newton, during his time as a part of the crew of a slave ship, might have heard welling up from the belly of the ship, the haunting sound of the sorrow chant of the human cargo that was being transported to a future full of fear and dread. That tune stayed with Newton and when he came to tell the story of his experiencing the transforming grace of God that led to his conversion, it was that tune that Newton saw as the most fitting vehicle for conveying his new-found state.

Let’s hear the opening verse of “Amazing Grace”

I think that “Amazing Grace” is a fitting framework for considering our Church’s Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity: Justice – the right of *all* people to receive that which is necessary for their survival and sustenance; Dignity – the entitlement of *all* people to be valued for who they are, their essential worth (dignitas), and not for their physical or mental or psychological characteristics or their status or service; Solidarity – the recognition that we are all part of one another and that we all exist only through the ‘lovingkindness’, the Grace, of God.

It is fitting, because we know that, in some way, we have *all* fallen short of that grace and that had it not been for the renewing and repeating of that grace, none of us would be where we are today.

It is fitting, because we recognise and affirm that in spite of all our failings and all the structures we establish and uphold, still the purposes of God are being worked out and the will of God will prevail, namely, that all people should have “life in all its fullness”. I like to refer to that as “God’s algorithm of grace”, the way that God takes all the factors of existence and experience, the brokenness and the joy, the negatives and the positives, the multiplications and divisions, additions and subtractions, cubing and square-rooting, and any other symbols and variations that come our way, and in the wisdom of God the omniscient and loving mathematician, the final answer is “flourishing and fullness of life for anyone and everyone who welcomes the grace of God”.

That, I believe is the significance of this report, it marks the point where the Methodist Church says, “we were lost, but now we’re found; we were blind, but now we see.”

But the report is not just about a new beginning and a new commitment, it reminds us of some of the dark and painful experiences there have been along the way. So, let us hear the second verse of “Amazing Grace” – “Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come”.

....

Our Gospel, the story of God’s grace, takes seriously the reality and the damage of sin and brokenness and it calls for repentance – a change of heart and mind, an admitting of failure, of having ‘missed the mark’ (not hitting the target) in relation to the will and purpose of God, and a commitment to changing our direction of travel and our actions so that we are more in line with the will and purpose of God.

This can be a painful process, and in the Strategy, there are references to some of the pain that has been felt. Here are just a few quotations: *[Extracts from Section 1.b. of the Report... “the experiences of Methodist people”.]*

Behind these brief references there are many more examples that the working groups drew on the course of their work.

- So, Workstream 2 (Building Trust and Confidence) said, *“The voices of people who have suffered discrimination must be listened to and heard, empowering people and informing decision-making with a view to achieving real and lasting transformation.”*

It’s clear that many times in the past, this has not happened, and people who believe that they have been treated unfairly are left with a sense that the ‘system’ is stacked against them; it is as if there is one dominant scale and any other way of making music is deemed ‘out of tune’, or, that if the right notes might be there, then they’re definitely not in the right order! Do we dare to believe that God might be inviting us to try new rhythms and new ways of blending voices to produce music that is richer than anything that we previously imagined, and will we risk letting go of our received ways of listening and singing that we might learn the new forms God is offering us?

- There is a lot of ‘anecdotal evidence’ that in the disciplinary processes of the Methodist Church, there is a disproportionate number of people of Black and Global Majority Heritage who become involved in enquiries and/or formal disciplinary proceedings. I say ‘anecdotal’ because the Church has not kept the figures that could prove or disprove that assertion of disproportionality. The Strategy makes clear that this must change.
- I believe that one of the questions being addressed by the Strategy is “What is it about diversity that causes so many people to be afraid? What are we so afraid of losing, or becoming, that we adopt as our default position ‘Let’s stick with what we know’?” The Strategy invites us to look at the ‘dangers, toils and snares’ inherent in that approach; to turn the question around and ask, “Who is being damaged or excluded by the ways we have been doing things, and what are we missing by not being more open to Grace?”

Acknowledging the past and changing our direction is important and is possible through grace. However, the new beginning needs to be expressed in new practices, new ways of behaving that help us avoid the damage and disasters of the past. I invite you to look at the Recommendations in the Strategy and to see how they apply to your situation...

In preparation, we hear the words of assurance in verse 4 of “Amazing Grace” – “The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures”.

...

I believe that what we are being offered in this Strategy is a way of entering into the fulness of life that God willed from eternity that we should know and live out. This is not about Utopia, ‘No Place’, it is very much about ‘This Place’ and this time. It is about practical, measurable ways of the reign of God becoming real among us.

What we are suggesting today is that by our taking just one aspect of the Strategy we can see growth and fruit in other areas also, and that can be a doorway into that fuller life that our world needs so desperately to experience. Covid 19, storms, earthquakes, wars, refugees desperately seeking safety and shelter, loneliness, insecurity and vulnerability – all affect us to a greater or lesser extent and none of us can resolve these problems. But the determination to be inclusive and to begin with those who are perhaps most noticeably different from ourselves, it is that commitment that will release new waves of grace for the healing of all and make us ready for the joys of heaven.

As the Report says, *“This will demand, of us all, penitence and hope, patience and commitment. But what if our life together were to be imagined as an ever-changing dance, where new steps can be introduced, and new rhythms and movements explored; where each encounter with ‘the other’ was approached as an opportunity to experience enrichment as we discover new aspects of our shared humanity?”*

Hear these words from Rev 7: 9-12; ...

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² singing,

*‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honour
and power and might
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’*

So, let us here and now anticipate that celebration as we sing together the final verse of Amazing Grace, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...”