

AMAZING GRACE

UK, 2006, d. Michael Apted



It is said that the hymn Amazing Grace is the best known in the English-speaking world. Most would not know that it was written by a ship's captain, heavily involved in the 18th century slave trade, who experienced a conversion and devoted his later life to prayer and reparation. His name was John Newton – and he is played most movingly here by Albert Finney.



However, the focus is on the anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce. He is played with intensity and conviction by television's Captain Horatio Hornblower, Ioann Gryffudd. And he is supported by a fine and extensive British cast including Michael Gambon as Lord Fox, Benedict Cumberbatch as the young Prime Minister, William Pitt, Rufus Sewell as the activist the Rev. Thomas Clarkson, Ciaran Hinds as the arrogant Lord Tarleton of Liverpool and Romola Garai as Barbara Spooner who eventually married Wilberforce.

Most audiences will find Amazing Grace a significant cinema experience. Its style is very much the British heritage recreation of a period, a meticulous presentation of period, costumes, décor and the atmosphere of the times – which culminates in a moving brass band rendition of Amazing Grace.

But, what will be important for audiences is the theme of the inhumanity and injustice of slavery and the fact that the plantations of the West Indies and the Americas depended for their prosperity on slave labour and the urban wealth of the 18th century metropolises, especially those in Britain and America, was based on slavery.

2007 sees the 200th anniversary of the Act for Abolition of the Slave Trade throughout the British Empire, although the final Slavery Abolition Act was not passed until 1833, the year of William Wilberforce's death. This makes the film immediately relevant, especially as questions about the need for apology from government, of justice for those who still live the consequences of this trade, are canvassed and argued.

The movement against slavery was not something that cropped up and achieved its goals over night. It took decades. And this is what this film portrays.

One of the arresting features of Amazing Grace is its presentation of Christian faith, convictions and action. Wilberforce as a child knew John Newton and his history and repentance. There are two moving sequences when Wilberforce visits the ageing and later blind Newton (who declares that he once was blind but now he really sees). Amongst the movement for the abolition of slavery were a number of religious ministers and Quakers. Wilberforce himself contemplated moving out of parliamentary life for prayer and solitude but was persuaded by Newton that faith needed action.

Wilberforce is a fine example of something that is very difficult to find these days, a man who brings his faith into public life.

The film opens in 1797, fifteen years after he began his crusade. He is unwell, is prescribed laudanum to ease the pain of his colitis. But, it is at this juncture, he meets Barbara Spooner, a strong-minded subscriber to his ideas and ideals. She encourages him to go on with his campaigns and he finds his voice again.

The film moves back to the 1780s and traces the collaboration between William Pitt who was to become Britain's youngest prime minister and who, in principle supported his friend from Cambridge days. While there are sequences showing some of the horrors of the slave ships and the sometimes frantic meetings conducted by Wilberforce and his group, some of the most interesting sequences are in the parliament with the heat of debate illustrating the self-interest and lack of compassion of so many members, many of whom were indebted to slavers and businessmen.

Wilberforce was a statesman, a man of honour – and a prophet for his times.