



## AMAZING GRACE (Cert PG)

**Reel Issues author:** Stephen Brown

**Overview:** Quality drama around the late 18th century campaign to awaken a cynical Parliament and sleeping nation to the inhumanities of the transatlantic slave trade.

**Director:** Michael Apted (2006)

**Film studio:** Momentum Pictures.

**Caution:** Contains references to the mistreatment of slaves and mild language.

**Length:** 109 minutes

### SUMMARY OF PLOT

The story of the campaign for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade told chiefly through the actions of British MP William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd) between 1782 and 1807. We witness Wilberforce's strenuous efforts to convince Parliament, impelled by his Christian faith and the backing of a determined group of researchers and campaigners. In a relationship that is warm but often stormy, his friend, William Pitt the Prime Minister (Benedict Cumberbatch), encourages and tempers Wilberforce's passionate advocacy. The numerous setbacks to the campaign are the result of many seeing slavery as an economic necessity if not merely a lucrative business, leading his opponents into trickery to thwart change. Wilberforce finds himself in some rather unlikely alliances along the way. His assistants in the campaign include angry young radical Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), former slave Olaudah Equiano (Youssou N'Dour) and establishment old hand Lord Charles Fox (Michael Gambon). The growing relationship with Barbara (Romola Garai) increasingly becomes Wilberforce's guiding light, just as John Newton (Albert Finney), a former slave ship captain

converted to the abolitionist cause, had initially inspired Wilberforce to join the fight against slavery.

### SOME KEY ISSUES

**Righteousness and justice** – Wilberforce's campaigners are appalled at the cruelty of a trade which, despite no outright biblical condemnation of slavery, strikes them as contrary to Christian principles. Wilberforce has to contend with an opposition intent on preserving an avaricious self-interest and constituency benefits.

**Personal, sacrificial cost** – The rigours of many years opposing the will of the majority has its effects on the health and even personal relationships of those protesting.

**Political astuteness** – The abolitionists learn how to utilise the parliamentary system to bring about reform, the means being seen as justifying the end. Not only that, but they do the necessary research into the slave trade and the hard thinking about how to draw MPs and public onto their side. Wilberforce quickly seizes opportunities to win the hearts and minds of others e.g. organising a 'pleasure' cruise to bring some of London's elite face to face with the reality of slavery.

### CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

**Clip 1 (DVD title 1, chapter 2 (starts 0 hour 11.41 minutes, ends 0 hour 14.13 minutes) approx 2.5 minutes length)**

Wilberforce, drinking and gambling, is manipulated by a parliamentary opponent, the Duke of Clarence, into a wager over a slave.

#### *Small groups discussion and feedback*

- What could Wilberforce have done differently either to prevent being cornered in this way or, if

that was unavoidable, what other choices did he have apart from walking out?

- By employing a slave as his driver, the Duke of Clarence has prevented him from dying of exhaustion on a sugar plantation. Is his a wiser, more realistic and pragmatic way than Wilberforce's to bring about justice? How did the group feel about Clarence's offer and his attitude to his slave? If slavery was such an accepted part of 18th Century society, what might we be as blind to in our own day and age?
- Whilst the film speaks of some of the horrors of slavery, we see virtually nothing on screen. What did the group think about this?

**Clip 2 (DVD title 1, chapter 4 (starts 0 hour 30.01 minutes, ends 0 hour 34.18 minutes) approx 4.25 minutes length)**

Wilberforce hesitantly seeks out his childhood mentor, John Newton a former slave ship captain turned Church of England minister. Best known for writing the hymn 'Amazing Grace' he strove, after his conversion to lead a truly Christian life. In this, he was not always successful. He manages, he says, to be a monk only on some days of the week. Wilberforce (who in real life struggled to keep his wine consumption down to six glasses a day and whose medicinal use of opium became an addiction which he had to overcome) likewise wrestles with his faith and where it will lead him.

*Individuals*

Newton warns him of the cost of taking on the sins of others but nevertheless urges him to do so. Can you think of situations where you want to speak out or challenge what is happening? What are the likely hazards in doing so?

*Small groups discussion and feedback*

Were any of the group surprised by Newton's past (as a slave trader who, even as a preacher took many years before he spoke out against the trade) or Wilberforce's opium habit? How does an understanding of their weaknesses affect your view of them? How does it affect your expectations of leaders – including committed Christians – today?

**Clip 3 (DVD title 1, chapter 8 (starts 1 hour 16.16 minutes, ends 1 hour 17.26 minutes) approx 1 minute length)**

Barbara urges Wilberforce to keep on fighting despite defeats. She does so by describing a cosy scenario where his allies settle down into domestic bliss or work on less ambitious projects rather than pursue their cause.

*Buzz session*

- When have members of the group been tempted to settle for easier options? Was it fear, embarrassment, weakness, etc. which made you entertain the possibility? Did you succumb? How easy is it to rationalise lack of action by claiming it is 'sensible' or suchlike? Barbara encourages Wilberforce to rekindle his passion for the abolitionist cause and not to flag in his efforts.
- What are group members passionate about? Could group members support each other in acting on these concerns?

**Clip 4 (DVD title 1, chapter 9 (starts 1 hour 34.25 minutes, ends 1 hour 36.14) approx 2 minutes length)**

The abolitionists, under the guise of another bill, manage to pass an Act of Parliament which effectively

makes the transatlantic slave trade illegal. Furthermore, Wilberforce has ensured a House emptied of most of his opponents by having previously given them free tickets to the races.

### Whole group discussion

- Wilberforce has employed a similar strategy to one used by the other side at the beginning of the film (tickets to the opera). How did you feel about this? Is playing them at their own game a justifiable course of action for Christians?
- If the absent parliamentarians had not been at the races, then presumably there would have been a majority in favour of retaining slave trading. When in your view is it right to ignore or thwart majority opinion?

### GOD'S STORY

**Vision for justice: Isaiah 61.1–4** – These words from an Old Testament prophet brought hope to a people facing a situation of oppression. Repeated by Jesus (Luke 4.16-21), they offer a striking vision of how things ought to be, how they shall be. They go well beyond personal salvation. Instead, they map out a world where God's reign of justice and peace for all will prevail.

- What collective steps might be taken with others (whether or not they are Christians) which would bring the vision in the Book of Isaiah closer in our own day and age? Could we actually put names or situations against each category, e.g. the prophet says he brings good news to the poor. What do you think would constitute good news for today's afflicted people? Who would you say fit that description in the present world? Who are they and what would raise their spirits?

**Shrewd dealings: Luke 16.1–13** – Jesus' strange parable of the unjust steward tells of one who on being sacked for bad management, corruption even, lets all his master's debtors off a significant part of what they owe. And is commended for it!

- The master (it is unclear if this is the owner of the estate or Jesus himself) praises the children of this age for being more shrewd in dealing with the present generation than are the children of light. The abolitionists achieve success through employing shrewd politics. What do you see as the difference between shrewdness and dishonesty?
- The emphasis in the parable is about settling debts *quickly* as if time is running out. After 25 years' struggle to reform human behaviour, Wilberforce finds a way of shortcutting the process before his energy is completely exhausted. What might God be expecting us to do something about quickly?

**Slavery in the Bible: Philemon 1–16** – Paul's letter to Philemon is a plea to treat Onesimus, a runaway slave, as a beloved brother in Christ. The passage carries no suggestion that he is to be released from servitude nor that he should avoid due punishment. Paul, a man of his time, possibly sees nothing wrong with slavery (but notice 1 Corinthians 7.21) or – more likely – because he believed the end of the world was imminent, he considered addressing social reforms as pointless.

- How were the abolitionists able to appeal to Christian convictions in upholding their cause when nowhere in the Bible is slavery condemned outright? Imagine yourself in their shoes. What other biblical themes would you use to persuade others of the wrongs of slavery? Perhaps look at Matthew 7.12, Luke 10.27, Genesis 1.26-27 and Acts 10.34, which are some of the passages used by the anti-slavery campaigners themselves.

- Can you think of other modern-day concerns on which the Bible is either silent or seemingly neutral but which at a deeper level we can find biblical guidance? For example, Scripture never mentions greenhouse gases but from the first chapter of Genesis onwards God is bidding us to look after his creation.

*Stephen Brown is an Anglican priest, group trainer and internationally known authority on feature films. He regularly broadcasts, teaches and writes for the Church Times and others about films .*

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