

Sunday 30th August - Acts 12

A fascinating story with 3 juxtapositions.

1. Earthly power v Spiritual power

Herod is the grandson of the Herod when Jesus was born. He was high-born and used to mixing in the imperial circles of Rome. We're not told why he wanted to persecute the church but maybe the apostles' fraternising with Gentiles gave the Jewish authorities cause for concern and Herod wanted to maintain peace as he was both a pious observer of Jewish practices and a ruthless suppressor of minorities when they became disruptive.

James was one of the sons of Zebedee, whom Christ told that they should drink of the cup that he was to drink of, and be baptised with the baptism that he was to be baptised with. After Stephen, he was one of the earliest Christian martyrs. And it seems that Peter, maybe along with other church leaders, was imprisoned. He was held over the 7-day Festival of Unleavened Bread.

Note the level of guarding - 16 men to protect one prisoner.

And then comes spiritual power - one angel. Spiritual power is a theme through the whole of this passage. Indeed, the whole of the Acts of the Apostles, which would be better called that Acts of the Holy Spirit.

So, spiritual intervention. One angel. Peter is awoken, given clear instructions and he is sprung from prison. Which introduces the second juxtaposition:

2. Prison v prayer

While Peter was in prison we're told that the church was earnestly praying for him.

Note that Peter was asleep. This was potentially the night before his execution but he was at peace. A sign of trusting God.

But then the angel interrupts his sleep but Peter doesn't know if he is dreaming or it is real. Simple instructions are given and followed. As with Saul the light blinds the guards and Peter is led out of the prison. At the next street corner he is left on his own but knows "without a doubt" that he is free.

And his natural reaction? To go to the house of prayer. He knew they would be praying for him and he wanted them to know their prayers had been answered.

One commentator writes: "Luke presents prayer as "the natural atmosphere of God's people and the normal context for divine activity." If extended, fervent, united prayer is not a church's first resort in a time of crisis, the church reveals that it is ultimately depending on something or someone other than God."

But our third juxtaposition is perhaps the most challenging:

3. Faith v Fate

Can you sense the humour of the situation? Peter is an escaped fugitive, standing outside a house which the authorities would have known as a home for believers. Rhoda comes to the door and is so excited to see Peter - "We've just been praying for you" might have crossed her mind!

She runs back to tell the others - "Stop praying! Peter's outside." And the response? "Don't be daft" and then, "oh we expected him to be executed and it is his spirit passing by on the way to glory!" As young Christians they still had some folklore beliefs!

But Peter is insistent and eventually gains entry to the house. After telling the story he says - "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this." For encouragement and as a reminder that God is in control, even in the most dire situations.

Wisely, Peter quickly moves on to another place knowing that there will be a commotion in the prison and he will be a wanted man.

Finally, we return to our first juxtaposition - Earthly power v Spiritual power.

Herod is fuming, his prize prisoner has gone so Peter's fate now becomes that of the guards who didn't guard. Herod then moved to Caesarea and is faced with another commotion. His subjects were forced to accept his terms for peace and he spoke eloquently to the people.

"He is a god" they exclaimed. But Herod had recently seen the works of the true and living God yet still didn't acknowledge him. He took the accolade for himself and God judged him for it. He died an horrible death, believed to be peritonitis and roundworms, because he had failed to acknowledge the first two commandment.

And against that sad end was the resounding success of the church. A simple statement in v24 "But the word of God continued to spread and flourish." So what? Let me simply summarise:

1. Earthly authority is subject to God.
2. Persecution is a real possibility for believers.
3. God is in control.
4. Prayer is effective - believe even when the odds seem stacked against you.
5. Expect the unexpected - have faith.
6. But the word of God will continue to spread and flourish.

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