

Feast of Saint Peter

Peter's rescue from prison – Acts 12:1-19

Following Christ isn't always a safe course. In some places today Christians suffer and die for their faith. This was certainly the case in the first century, as Luke's account in the passage from Acts tells. King Herod ruled a client kingdom. He was subordinate to the Roman Emperor who used local rulers to keep the peace in conquered territories. Herod saw the Christian movement as a threat, probably because they claimed Jesus was the true 'king of the Jews.' That, not surprisingly, was unacceptable to Herod, who claimed the title for himself. The Christian movement wasn't fermenting anything that could be described as rebellion, but Herod wasn't going to take any chances.

Herod had James killed first. This is James, the brother of John, who were among the first of Jesus' disciples. Having disposed of James, and seeing that it was a popular move, Herod went after Peter. Get a minor leader as a test case, and if that proves a popular move, go for a major figure such as Peter.

Living in New Zealand it can be difficult to imagine our faith leading to such consequences, though there have been occasions when Christians and others have suffered because of their beliefs. I think of my grandfather, for example, who was imprisoned in World War I because as a Christian he refused to carry military arms. But generally, we look to the state to protect us and to guarantee our safety and freedom of belief. It can be hard for us to appreciate what it was like for the first Christians – fearful of the violent hand of Herod and his soldiers. Yet Luke is out to show us that King Herod will be trumped by a mightier One. It's not kings (or presidents or prime ministers), who will have the last word – but God. When human rulers overstep the mark, they will, so Luke believes, be brought down, for nothing must hinder the movement of the gospel.

As this story develops, Luke gives an interesting insight into how the Christians handled the situation. 'While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.' Legal action or public protest weren't possibilities for the early church. They responded to the crisis in the only way they could – they prayed – and they prayed passionately and unceasingly.

It was a tense situation. Was the Christian movement going to survive? At the time it must have seemed as if the powers of evil would win. After all, their prayer hadn't saved James. Yet, it wasn't seen as a disaster. It was martyrdom, and martyrdom means a death that witnesses to something. For Christians it was a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, and as such, James' death was somehow caught up in the divine plan. It reminds me that what we see as a lack of success doesn't necessarily mean failure.

Now comes Peter's miraculous rescue from prison. 'The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.'

Peter's rescue is wonderful, but what about James? Why does one get saved and not the other? What about our experience? Perhaps there have been times when the angel of deliverance didn't appear, and God didn't get us out of the situation. It seems to me, that what God does is journey with us through the situation. The lack of a delivering angel doesn't mean that God has abandoned us. But having said that, it's not always easy for us to be so confident that God is with us. My life journey is one of learning to find God in suffering and failure as well as in success and joy. Suffering remains a mystery and evil seems to frequently go unpunished. The reality of life isn't as simple as

this story seems to make out.

Then there are times when the angel of deliverance does appear, and the chains fall away. For the early Christians this story showed God's power. But we can also read it, as Charles Wesley did, with a symbolic eye. Mindful of how we're constrained by bonds other than physical, Wesley wrote:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay / Fast bound in sin and nature's night; / Thine eye diffused a quickening ray / I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; / My chains fell off, my heart was free, / I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

I wonder what chains you've been freed from. How have you experienced that sense of imprisonment and freedom?

Now comes a delightful incident. Peter, free from prison, goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John-Mark. Members of the Christian community are gathered inside, praying. Peter knocks on the gate. A maid named Rhoda comes to answer. When she hears Peter's voice, she's too excited to open the gate. She runs back into the house and says that Peter is standing there. They said to her, 'You're out of your mind!' It must be an angel. Meanwhile, Peter, left outside, carries on knocking, and is finally let in.

There's irony in this story. The Christian community had enough faith to gather for prayer, and to pray fervently for several days. Yet when their prayer is answered, they can't believe it. They've been praying without really expecting God to answer their prayers – have we ever done the same thing?

So here's Peter, left outside, still banging on the door, while Rhoda, in her exuberance rushes back to inform every one of the news. When the door is finally unbolted, a breathless Peter stood before them. Luke is showing us the early church, not as super-Christians, but as the same kind of faith-one-minute and doubt the next sort of people, that we probably are.

The story moves back to the prison. Peter has gone. The guards are interrogated, but they have no idea how Peter escaped. Roman practice required that guards receive the penalty due their escaped prisoners. So, they're led away for execution. Meanwhile, Peter 'went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.'

Peter is freed to continue his ministry. The guards are killed in his place. It's a messy ending. Yet God continues to work through messy situations – work through people who believe one minute and doubt the next. Peter, who had his fair share of limitations and faults, is used by God to spread the good news. It's so with us.

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