

Acts 12:1 to 17, Evensong

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit  
Amen.

Quite often when we read the Bible we may not fully appreciate the drama which underlies the story, fortunately, in our story from Acts 12, it's difficult not to appreciate the drama involved.

However, it's also possible not to be able to appreciate it's relevance, after all Peter's dramatic escape from prison happened 2,000 years ago. So this evening I'm going to look at this story's relevance for us as Christians today.

Our reading starts with the words, “About that time King Herod laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

He had James, the brother of John killed by the sword ” Clearly a very dangerous time to be a Christian, as indeed it still is in some parts of the world today.

This king Herod of our story was the grandson of King Herod the great who killed all the children when Jesus was born and who also killed his son Aristobulus the father of the king Herod of our story, who's full name is king Herod Agrippa.

It would seem that king Herod Agrippa was no better than his grand father, what a violent family!

In verse 3 we hear that king Herod Agrippa proceeded to arrest Peter during the festival of unleavened bread.

The festival of unleavened bread is the seven day period straight after the Passover and celebrates the Israelites leaving Egypt as people freed from slavery.

Now it seems that Peter was arrested because the king saw how pleased the Jews were when he had James the apostle killed.

Although James is the only Christian leader mentioned, in fact Herod Agrippa had launched a genocidal attack on the Christian population, and up to that time the most prominent leader to be killed was James.

So he wanted to repeat the experience with Peter who was now a prominent leader in the area following the death of James.

Such was the hatred for Christians at that time, and such was the perverted nature of the king who could only see joy and pleasure in killing minority people who were different to them; genocide in Bosnia in the 1990's comes to mind.

When they'd seized Peter they put him in prison and guarded him with four squads of soldiers, a squad was four men who were on duty for three hours at a time, so each squad had two shifts in every 24 hours.

They made Peter sleep between two of the guards, and Peter was probably bound and chained to both guards, with the other two guards at the door.

They clearly did not want Peter to wander off, and in verse 5 we are told that the church were praying for him.

We don't know anything of the words of the prayers that the church prayed on behalf of Peter; but we do know two things about the effects of the prayers.

Firstly, God heard them and answered them by releasing Peter from the prison.

The other thing we know is that some of the people who were praying for him didn't have a lot of faith that God would somehow release Peter from prison, because when they were told that Peter was at the door they didn't believe it, because they said to the messenger, "You are out of your mind."

Now the first thing I would say about the last fact, is that the story about Peter's imprisonment must be true, because when St Luke wrote his book of Acts he wanted the book to encourage people to turn to Christ, and a negative thing, like not believing in the power of prayer by the then Christians, isn't very encouraging.

The second thing is that nevertheless it gives me encouragement, because I can be like those waiting for news of Peter very easily, because I can sometimes struggle with believing in prayer, especially when God appears not to answer them.

However going back to verse 6 we were told two remarkable things. Firstly Peter was sleeping between two soldiers; here was a man in certain danger of execution in the morning completely at ease sleeping, Peter's faith and trust in God, no matter what the outcome, was complete.

Secondly, that at the last minute a miracle happened, chains fell off, doors miraculously opened and the guards didn't hear a single thing, and Peter walked away from the prison a freed man, and we are told that he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark.

Now since Peter went straight there, it is thought that Mary's house may have been the headquarters of the Christian church at that time, it was certainly a place of prayer because that was where they had gathered to pray for Peter.

When Peter arrived at Mary's house and was eventually let in, he first described how God had released him, and he then said, "Go and tell James and the believers of my escape"; now this James is the brother of Jesus, who may well have been the true leader in Jerusalem at that time.

Now during Jesus' lifetime James did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. In John chapter 7 verse 5 John states clearly that his brothers didn't believe in him, and in Mark chapter 3 we are told that the crowd were saying that Jesus was out of his mind and his family went to him to restrain him.

But in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 the risen Christ showed himself to James, and James' life was changed for ever, and it is the knowledge that Christ rose from the dead that changed my life, and no doubt changed your lives as well.

Now one question many people may be asking themselves when they read or hear this story of Peter's escape is; "Do I believe it; or do I think that it's just a tall story to help me believe in a miraculous God.

Or is it just St Luke being more positive for the sake of new converts to Christianity, possibly to counter the previous negativity of unbelief when the messenger told them that Peter was outside, and they accused the messenger of being out of her mind.

A few weeks ago I told a true story of a submarine captain, who became my vicar just after the second world war.

At that time, I retold the story in the context of God acting in the sheer silence, and not in the roar of the engines or in the panic of the crew when trying to release the submarine from the bottom of the ocean.

But I am now going to retell the same story in the context of a miracle that didn't happen 2,000 years ago but in my lifetime.

Just after the second world war a submarine captain was demobbed, and became the vicar of my church.

He told us that one day while trying to get away from an attacking German destroyer, he was forced to go deep in the ocean, he told us that they settled on the bottom where they stayed for some hours, until the destroyer gave up and went away.

He then gave the order to go up to periscope level, but the submarine wouldn't move. They tried full throttle both forward and backwards as I remember the story he told.

The submarine would not move, it was clearly stuck to the bottom for some unknown reason. He told us that as they were getting near to the end of their air supply he brought the whole crew to his deck so that they would be altogether at the end, and they all prayed.

While praying the submarine quietly, almost imperceptibly, began to rise. In this case God didn't undo a few chains and open a few doors.

God moved a submarine from the bottom of an ocean on his own, and submarines then had a displacement typically of up to 1,000 tons; that was a miracle which didn't save one life, but possibly a hundred lives.

I have absolute belief in God not necessarily because he performed miracles 2,000 years ago which you can read about in the Bible, but because he performs them today, and more than likely every single day.

Just two weeks ago the bishop of Oxford confirmed 4 adults and 4 young people in their faith in our church, 8 more people saved to Christ.

For Peter, Jesus was a real person, who he had lived with, slept along side of and eaten with, who he knew as the Son of God.

He also knew, that through God, he was released from certain death at the hands of King Herod, but who, before his release, was content and ready to die, if that was God's plan for him, because if that hadn't been the case then he certainly wouldn't have been able to sleep.

Peter's experience of God changed his life, and my childhood vicar's experience of God certainly changed his life, and probably many other lives as well, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is still changing and saving people's lives today.

God did not create the world and then walk away, God is still active and creative in our world, and in people today, as he has always been, and our relationship with Jesus can be as real today as it was for St Peter all those years ago.

God through the Holy Spirit is still saving lives today as he always has done, because the Lord is here, his spirit is with us.