

“Persecution. Prayer. Progress.”

6 June 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Above All

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 12:1-25

Sermon:

Last week I told you that my car passed its NCT and each test was passed well within the parameters set; I had a healthy car. This week while in Ballycastle, a warning light came on in the car which, when I checked, said I should contact the garage. It was the symbol of an engine and said “Malfunction Indicator Light” in the handbook. It’s hard to drive when you are wondering if your car is going to stop and leave you stranded. So, what did I do? Honestly, I said a prayer and considered all sorts of possible ways I should deal with this. I’ll tell you what happened later.

The point is that life is never straightforward. Unexpected difficulties arise and problems must be faced. Life has its ups and downs. Last week, the church in Antioch was doing well. It was a bright light; they were in partnership with God, wholehearted in service, active in discipleship and generous towards their brothers and sisters in the Lord. All was going well. Yet in Jerusalem at about this time, the Church there faced a significant problem. Today we will see how they dealt with the problem and learn lessons for us as a church who will face difficulties.

I. Persecution

The church's problem was Herod Agrippa I, known as King Herod, the great grandson of King Herod the Great who murdered the babies in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. He had grown in influence with the Romans and ruled an extensive area of Palestine. He courted the favour of the Jews, especially the Sanhedrin, by honouring their laws and attacking the Church. He had James the Apostle beheaded and Peter arrested and thrown into prison. This was a populist move at the time of a significant Jewish festival, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was the week following the Passover, the two festivals being seen as the one event. It was, in effect, a public holiday and so nothing could be done to process the public trial of Peter and his planned execution. So he was locked up securely and guarded around the clock by four different groups of soldiers in a shift system of six hours for each group.

As we say, King Herod held all the aces. He had power and authority, decided the fate of the church leaders, and did what he wanted for his own reasons. He held the power of law and death, and the church by contrast was weak and unable to resist his ways.

Verse 5 is Luke’s summary: *“So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”*

Herod Agrippa was, in effect, the state authority and, having aligned himself with the Jewish religious authorities, he represented political and religious persecution. Logging on to the

Church in Chains website, or watching the news, reminds us of the Church's difficulties, and we can imagine the reality and accompanying fear and questioning that would arise within the Church. If I were a member of the Church at that time, I would have lots of questions for God: Why have You allowed this to happen? What have we done wrong, meriting such heavy and unjust suffering? Usually, the why questions are rarely answered. However, the focus of the story as told by Luke shows us what the Church did and what the outcome was.

Verse 5 accepts the reality of Peter's imprisonment but they turn to God in prayer. As Peter was later to say in his letter to the churches, *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed"* (1 Peter 4:12-13).

The Christian church must expect times of suffering and difficulty. They happen in a sinful world under the sovereignty of God. We are not to be surprised! Ireland is not an exception.

II. Prayer

Back to the car; the car manual gave me some guidance, i.e. what the light was for or was telling me. Apparently, it could flash on an off in amber, be permanently amber or red. I was looking at an amber non flashing symbol of a car engine. It told me to seek help from a main dealer. So, my mind turned to how that would work since I was about 250 kilometers away from where I bought the car, and it did not help that the dealership had moved or that my normal mechanic was not a main dealer. My mother offered the help of her mechanic, but since it appeared to be a computer problem, and as the car was still driving, that did not seem the best option. All options didn't help and so I had my lunch - a chilli chicken panini and salad - and it was very nice. When I got home to Ballycastle went to my room, shut the door and told God about it and asked that He would get us home. I'll tell you what the answer was later.

The beheading of Apostle James undoubtedly put fear into the Church. They had suffered a terrible loss of leadership. Herod was in the ascendancy, did what he wanted, and his policy of execution of church leaders successfully increased his standing with the Jews. The Church, by contrast, appears to have no power or influence in this world, but they do have the Lord and so they prayed.

- A. Earnestly:** We are told in v.5 they prayed earnestly, with fervour, using the same expression describing Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane. Their prayer is sincere, intense, and passionate; it's like a sweating drops of blood type of prayer.
- B. Corporately:** v.12 tells us many of the church members met for prayer, a church prayer time that took place late at night. The image of this is challenging to me. They shared a deep concern for Peter; they were praying for him. Their prayer was earnest, corporate and personal.
- C. Learned from experience:** It is likely they were praying for Peter's release. Some of them must have remembered that Peter had been in prison twice before (see Ch. 4 and 5). What would they have learned from the experience? Well, in Ch. 4 the prayer focused on the sovereignty of God, how the nations may rail against Him but such resistance is pointless, and was based on the teaching in Psalm 2. In Ch. 5, they experienced an answer which was supernatural: an angel of the Lord opened the door and led Peter and the other Apostles out to the temple courts where they were

told to teach about Jesus. Their experience of God in prayer taught them to pray in line with scripture and how God could do the impossible even by supernatural means. I have no doubt they were asking God to intervene personally and free Peter.

“So, Peter was kept in prison, but the Church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

Having access to God, recognising who He is, His power, sovereign control, and love encourages us to face persecution and our difficulties with confidence. Considering this reality, the Church must pray: *“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”* (Hebrews 4:16).

III. Progress

I may at this point sound like an advert for the Northern Ireland Tourism Board, but Ballycastle has a new bespoke hotel called the Salt house with fantastic views into Glenshesk and over the sea to Fair head, Rathlin Island and Scotland (the Mull of Kintyre). So we decided because it was my birthday the next day, afternoon coffee and scones could be had as a special treat and as I drove to the Salt House I realised that the warning light had disappeared and it didn't come back again, even as we drove home to Dublin. It was for me a definite answer to prayer and I am happy to acknowledge it as that!

Luke recalls the story of Peter's miraculous release which is incredible. For some speaking of or believing in angels and miracles is a step too far and impossible to believe but for all who believe in the God of the bible, angels are often spoken about, and it is perfectly feasible they could be sent by God to secure his release, Peter is happy to acknowledge the story as one which the Lord accomplished (v.11,17).

The story is comical and at the same time deadly serious. Peter faces a trial and impending death the next day, but he sleeps and must be poked hard to awaken him despite the cell filling with light. He is guided through three guarded gates without any hindrance, and it is only when he is standing away from the prison (v.10) that he finally wakes up, so to speak, and realises it was not a dream.

Peter desires to share the news with the Church and he knocks at the door where he knew the believers would be meeting, the home of Mary the mother of John Mark. Rhoda, the servant girl's excitement at hearing Peter's voice, causes her to leave him at the door. Those inside praying for his release do not believe Rhoda, the possibility that their prayers were answered so immediately and clearly doesn't even enter their thinking. It does make sense because such an answer would be impossible.

The reality is not funny, Peter has to go into temporary hiding, and the church apostles must be told of the danger (v.17) and very sadly the soldiers are put to death (v.19). Roman practice stated the guards would suffer the same plight as the prisoner who escaped from their custody. Tragically, Herod died also, and Luke recounts his death in considerable detail. The context is a political dispute between the cities of Tyre and Sidon, and Herod's Palestine. An audience is mediated by his personal secretary at a public gathering where Herod is due to give a speech. This story is corroborated by the Jewish historian Josephus who tells us it took place at games organised for Caesar's birthday where Herod became ill and left dying five days later as described. If the description given by Luke (a doctor) was entered on his death certificate it would make for gruesome reading: cause of death "eaten by worms". There have been different suggestions about what happened. The two most

likely, I think, would be either death by gut obstruction caused by intestinal worms or acute appendicitis, peritonitis and secondary worm infestation. Luke, however, attributes his death to the Lord through His angel and it was such a humbling experience. Pride was his downfall and he was humiliated in public by his physical weakness and a slow and painful death. Herod died. God absolutely reigns and one of the main sources of their persecution was gone.

Luke concludes with the complete reversal of the situation and this wonderful summary of v.24: *“but the word of God continued to increase and spread.”* The Church grows, it is healthy and strong unlike its once powerful nemesis and the scene is set for the beginning of a worldwide missionary adventure, which Luke details in the second half of Acts.

As the psalmist reminded us at the start of the pandemic: *“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea”* (Psalm 46:1-2). We are thankful He has honoured His promise to us.

This is the good news of faith in Jesus Christ. In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him who loved us. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. When difficulties come into your life, trust in Jesus and turn to the Lord in prayer. Your troubles are our troubles, so please ask other members of the church to pray, and do not be afraid because God cares and will help care for you. Be attentive to the answers He brings, even if surprising.

Praise: Angels

Lessons in Acts

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: It Is Well With My Soul

Benediction

Discussion & Application:

Can you remember specific answers to prayer during times of difficulty? What might the Lord be teaching you through these situations?

Consider what difficulties face the Church today and commit to pray about them.

Is there a particular lesson or thought that you believe God has been teaching you from our time studying Acts 1-12?