

ACTS 12:1-17  
PETER, PRISON AND GRACE!

Let me tell you a story: it is the story of a boy who is trying to make his way in the world. He is excited about life and what life might be; he has ambitions and hopes, for school, and for beyond school, for life itself! He has choices to make along the way: he has made some good choices, but he has also made some bad choices, leaving him in company with people who lead him down dark alleyways, choices that he has to unpick and repair the damage. But there are also other choices made for him by other people and these choices also make life hard for him, put him in situations where he finds it hard to behave well; he gets angry; he rages against life and the people around him, which only makes matters worse. He wants to know that life will get better for him, but he also wants to know how to handle his situations because at the moment he simply feels helpless in the face of life. He is powerless to change things for himself; other people keep telling what to do, his parents, his teachers, other older 'wiser' adults; he knows the answers, but feels powerless to do anything about it!

Before you tell me what he should do, let me say that this boy's story is not unique; indeed this story is the pulling together of several stories into one. I don't want you to give quick and easy answers to this boy's powerlessness, but first I want us to realise that we're all there are times. It can be all kinds of different situations: someone sits down to an exam paper and their first impression is "there is nothing here that I can do; I have not revised these topics" – panic! There is a medical consultation to get the results from tests and we are hoping for good news, but it is not good news – feelings of helplessness wash over you and you are not sure what happens next. A Church looks at its situation: it is getting smaller, older, and is struggling to make an impact on community in which it lives; the people say they have tried everything and it has made no difference – there is a feeling of powerlessness, what to do next? It is a hard place to be, especially if you are someone who likes to have everything organised and in order and know exactly what comes next.

The Church in Acts 12 felt powerless. Persecution was the reason. "*It was...*" (Acts 12:1f) This is a different Herod from the man who met Jesus on the way to the cross, this was his nephew. He took it on himself to persecute the church; he discovered that it made him popular with some so he carried on! James was one of the original twelve disciples, a fisherman, the brother of John and leader of the church; Herod had him arrested and then put to death, a martyr for his faith. We're not told, but we presume that this spread a sense of fear through the church; "what will happen next?" What happened next what that he had Peter arrested: "*When he...*" (Acts 12 :3f) Peter is in prison, awaiting trial and we presume that will be a summary show-trial, made up for the crowds because Herod already knows what he plans to do and that is to have Peter killed.

There is something reminiscent of Jesus' story here. It reads like the story of Jesus' way to the cross; Peter is walking in Jesus' footsteps, facing similar kinds of tests and trials as Jesus faced. Jesus faced trial by Herod and Pilate and here is Peter with the prospect of something similar happening to him, with the same result predicted – as Jesus died at the hands of cruel men for no just reason, so Peter faces the same! We will see in a moment how Peter reflected on that later in his life, but at this stage we have to imagine that there is a sense of fear in the hearts of the church, if not with Peter himself. Jesus went the way of the cross as someone who appeared powerless to change things; He was urged to bring armies of angels down to carry Him off the cross, but that was not how it was to be; for Jesus the cross was to lead to resurrection. How was it to be for Peter?

One single sentence sums up the church's reaction: "So Peter..." (Acts 12 :5) When they felt powerless, the church prayed and kept praying. "The Church turned to prayer which is the only power the powerless possess." (John Stott) Would that be the first response of the church today? There is a danger that we respond to difficult things first by devising a strategy to meet our situation: churches devise programmes and strategies for dealing with this or that crisis. Individually we devise coping strategies, ways in which we can deal with things that trouble us. Now, there is nothing wrong with strategies and programmes, but the Church in Acts 12 had a different answer to feeling powerless – they prayed! They prayed and they kept on praying "earnestly", praying for their church leader in prison, persecuted for his faith, in danger of death.

What did they pray? It might seem obvious what they prayed for, but keep that for a second. What did they pray? They might have prayed for an end to the hurricane storm of persecution, that it would end with Peter. They might have prayed that Peter would have the strength to cope with his ordeal and that he would be able to confess his faith even in that situation, and not give up his faith in the face of hardships. They might have prayed that the church would not be scattered by this experience, but would be able to stay together in Jerusalem despite all that is happening. They might have prayed that God will be glorified by the pattern of events that are unfolding before their eyes and that even as Peter is made a martyr that might be opportunity for the gospel to spread even further. They might have prayed all these things.

They might also have prayed for his release; but see what happens afterwards. We've told the story of his release from prison, with the power of God at work in this quite magnificent way and Peter is set free; he only realises that he is free when he is standing in the street, alone! His first reaction is to go to tell the church what has happened and I find the rest of story slightly comic, but also slightly sad. Peter goes to the house where the church is meeting and is praying (we presume). He knocks at the door and the servant called Rhoda comes to answer his knock. Who is there? "When she..." (Acts 12 :14) Peter left standing at the door, outside in the street; why did she not open the door? She is too excited! She went to tell the people inside "Peter is..." but their answer makes me wonder: "You're out..." (Acts 12 :15) Did they not consider that Peter could be free! Were they not praying for his release? The only way to be sure – go to the door; let the man in! They see with their own eyes, Peter is there!

"When you pray, God makes something happen!" That's been a refrain running through these sermons over the last few weeks. The challenge for us is to believe that. The early church certainly believed in the power of prayer: time and time again we read of the church praying together and God making something happen for them. Prayer is an act of faith: when we pray, we express our trust in God in two ways: first, we trust that He is able to answer our prayers, that He has the power to help us; secondly, we trust that He listens to us, so that we're not talking to the floor or the ceiling, but that our prayers express something of our relationship with God. Prayer is a bit like a muscle on your body: if ever you've had a broken leg, you'll know that the muscle inside the plaster tends to waste away because it is not used and you have to spend time building the muscle up again before it can be as useful to you again as it was before. Prayer is a bit like that kind of muscle: the more we use the gift of prayer, the stronger it becomes; when we don't use it, then it wastes away. When we pray, even falteringly, with prayers that have no carefully formed words, God makes something happen for us.

The late David Watson from York, wrote a very good book called *Discipleship* and there is a chapter on prayer; he asked the question "when should we pray?" He based his answer on what he saw of Jesus in the gospels and came up with seven answers. We should pray, he said: every morning; before making important decisions; when

we're very busy; when we're concerned about others; when we're being tempted; when we're in pain; at the moment of death. In between all of that, there are moments when we simply breathe a prayer for help on the spur of the moment. There is nothing better for us in prayer but to develop it as a habit and a regular practice. When we pray, God makes something happen, whether we do it on our own or in a group with others; the key quality is that our prayer is sincere and real; this is not about going through the motions, but is about people deeply and genuinely seeking God and His grace.

How often we feel powerless! There are all kinds of situations in which we feel powerless to do anything to change or remedy the situation. That is true of us as individuals; it is true of us as Church, locally, nationally, world-wide. What do we do when we feel powerless? The only power we possess when we are powerless is prayer; prayer connects us to the power of God; the power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us and we connect to that power when we pray. Prayer should be our first response, our default position when we feel powerless; our first response should be to pray, to commit our way to God, to seek His grace. Often it is our place of last resort: "I've tried everything else, let me try prayer". Let's make it our first response; when we pray God makes something happen.

Peter looked back on his experience in prison, suffering for his faith, being persecuted. He said he was not surprised that he was persecuted; he saw it as a privilege to share in the same experience as Jesus; he saw himself as someone blessed by God through this experience, his faith strengthened, praising God for bearing the name of Jesus and suffering for Jesus. Distance lends that perspective, perhaps; the story itself shows us Peter not sure of what was happening as he escaped – "am I dreaming?"; the story shows us the church disbelieving that Peter was at the door! We have a God of surprises, who so often blesses us with far more than we thought possible, a God who answers our prayers and sometimes the answers are far bigger than we dared hope. When we pray, God makes something happen. Peter and the church discovered that in a grand way! Let's open our eyes; God is still making things happen when we pray.