

A King is Dead

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of January 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled, A King is Dead, and is from Acts chapter 12, verses 1 to 25. Our gracious God, we thank you for your word.

We pray that it would feed us now as we listen to it. And we pray, Lord, that we would be inspired and encouraged to go out and serve you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated.

You may like to open your Bibles to Acts chapter 12. By way of explanation, we've been preaching through Acts in the evening and the morning services. And today we're looking at Acts chapter 12 on page 896.

Well, the Christian life is one that is full of challenges. There are lots of highs and lows that go on. In our lives as we live out the Christian faith. For some people, the lows are so low that they conclude God has abandoned them.

[1 : 1 0] And they declare the popular idiom that God is dead. For others, somehow they manage to persevere. Somehow, through the roller coaster of life, they keep faithfully serving the Lord, convinced that he is not dead.

And this sort of thinking and living is not really all that unique to this point of time. I think it's been present ever since the dawn of time, in one sense. And the roller coaster effect is also certainly apparent, as I just mentioned in this reading from Acts 12 this morning.

In fact, we see it throughout the book of Acts, this roller coaster effect. Early on in the church's life, there is a period of rapid expansion as a result of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

The roller coaster is going up high. And then there is this time of persecution for a church. It comes down low. And we see in chapter 4 that the Apostle Peter and John are thrown in jail and taken before the council.

And it gets really low in chapter 7, when Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. Well, despite this setback, the roller coaster is really down low.

[2 : 2 3] Despite this setback, there is the further spread of the Gospel. The Gospel goes from the Jews out to the Gentiles, those people who are not Jews.

The roller coaster goes up again, I guess. And we read today, as we read the Bible, we read what Jesus has said will happen. And that is, in the Gospels he proclaimed, at the beginning of Acts, we read that the good news of Jesus Christ has spread from Jerusalem and has gone to Samaria.

And now it has been proclaimed to the Gentile people as well, which is what we saw last week. It starts, the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles really starts in the city of Antioch.

But it has moved way beyond the city and the boundaries of Antioch by the time the book of Acts is completed by its author, Luke. Well, Luke, being faithful in showing us that living the Christian life is not all a bed of roses, then reveals to us in chapter 12 another major setback.

The roller coaster just dives down for the first followers of Jesus. At the outset, it does look like a setback. But by the end, it's a victory for the sovereign God.

[3 : 42] Nothing, and not even human dynasties, will thwart God's plans. So firstly, we read in verses 1 to 5 about King Herod's plot here.

In verse 1, About that time, King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. Now this Herod that's been talked about here is the grandson of Herod the Great, who was the ruler at the time of Jesus' birth.

He was also, this King Herod in chapter 12 here, was also known as Agrippa, and was given charge of the regions of Judea and Samaria. And even though he was called King Herod, he was still under the rule of this Roman emperor at the time called Claudius.

Herod's intention, though, was to make himself popular among the Jews, maintaining the peace within the territory that he was given to rule. And he did this by conscientiously observing the Jewish law, keeping the Jews happy.

And another thing he did was to now persecute the church. So we read in verse 2, He had James, who was the brother of John, and one of the disciples that was with Jesus, he had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.

[5 : 00] Now it's interesting to note that this same James and John talked about here, who had asked Jesus for the best seats in the kingdom, that they would also drink his cup and share his baptism, and that is, participate in his sufferings, as Mark 10 talks about.

It's that same James and John. And this James here, in verse 2, is executed, probably beheaded. And John ends up in exile.

Well, in verse 3, after Herod saw that it pleased the Jews by doing this, he proceeded to arrest Peter also, during the festival of unleavened bread.

Now this festival follows immediately after Passover, during which Jewish law neither permits sentencing nor trials. So after Peter was arrested, Herod, as verse 4 tells us, put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him.

Now each squad, each of these four squads, had four soldiers, each working by shifts, so that each squad would be on duty. So there would be always four soldiers guarding Peter at the time.

[6 : 12] And we read of Herod's plot here, in verse 4, Herod intended to bring him out to the people after the Passover, for a public trial, which then of course would be followed by his execution.

And that was Herod's plot, and it was to gain favour with the people. Now the situation looked utterly hopeless, didn't it? There seems to be no possibility of Peter's escape.

What could this little community of Jesus' people, in its powerlessness, do against the armed might of Rome? What could they do?

The answer is seen in verse 5. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. The sort of prayer they pray is with the same sort of intensity that Jesus prayed when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And notice here, that this Christian community is a faith community. They pray to God. They had seen God work a miracle previously, when Peter had been imprisoned.

[7 : 26] Now, why couldn't God do the same thing now? They realised how powerless they were against these four squads of Roman soldiers guarding Peter.

But they knew that God could release Peter as they prayed fervently to him. So what we see here is two communities, the world and the church, arrayed against one another, each wielding an appropriate weapon.

And on this side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of prison and so on. And on this side, the other side was the church, which had turned to prayer, which is the only power the powerless possess.

Well, it seems that prayer is a powerful weapon that we as Christians have, because we discover in verses 6 through to 19 that Herod's plot is defeated.

Prayer is a powerful thing. All the great security measures that Herod has gone to fails. His whole plot fails.

[8 : 41] Why? Because God, the God whom Peter worships, whom the followers of Jesus worship, this God acts.

And he acts decisively. Even though Peter is bound between two chains, sleeping between two soldiers while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison, Peter escapes.

Utterly amazing. And all this happens the night before Peter is about to be brought before Herod and tried. Now I wonder if we too can think of situations where God has intervened right at the last moment.

We think life is hopeless and God's abandoned us. And then suddenly God sorts out the mess that we have made or that we've got into. Peter's escape is brought about due to the divine intervention of God.

An angel sent by God appears to him. And this angel is a heavenly agent sent by God. The very presence of the angel brings a presence of light as verse 7 says.

[9 : 54] And what follows is a series of miraculous events. First of all we see that the guards are all asleep as is Peter when this angel appears.

And Peter needs to be tapped on the shoulder or another version says he needs to be poked in the side by the angel to wake him up. And then we read in verse 7 that Peter's chains just fell off.

No keys, no nothing like that, they just fell off. And in verse 10 after they had passed through the guards when the angel has taken him out they come before this iron gate, a big gate presumably.

And this gate opened for them of its own accord. Verse 11 Peter himself says that the Lord has sent an angel and rescued him from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.

They were expecting to see another execution. Peter's been delivered from that. God who rescues Peter here is also the same God who has rescued Israel countless times in the Old Testament but more particularly thinking of this God who has rescued Israel from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt.

[11 : 09] God heard the people's cry in Egypt and here in Acts chapter 12 he had heard and answered the Christians fervent prayer in accordance to his will.

And this community of Christians certainly did not believe that God was dead even though life looked pretty grim. Well in Peter's realisation of his release we read in verses 12-17 that as soon as he realised this that it was an angel who had rescued him and that God had delivered him he went to the house of Mary the mother of John whose other name was Mark where many had gathered and were praying this was presumably a regular meeting place for the Christians at the time and when he knocked at the outer gate a maid named Rhoda came to answer on recognising Peter's voice she was so overjoyed that instead of opening the gate she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate so excited but they were busy praying in the middle of the night and they said to her you're out of your mind but she insisted that it was so and they said it's an angel it's his guardian angel meanwhile

Peter continued knocking so he was persistent and when they opened the gate they saw him and were amazed he motioned to them with his hand to be silent and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of prison and he added tell this to James and to the other believers then he left and went to another place now this James that's talked about in verse 17 is not the same James in verse 2 this is Jesus' brother James that we're talking about in verse 17 and he was at that time probably the recognised leader of the Jerusalem church but perhaps the most important statement of these verses is verse 17 where it says the Lord where Peter says to the believers the Lord had brought him out of prison the details that Luke includes here all emphasise the intervention of God and the passivity of Peter as I just said a moment ago

Peter was asleep the angel had to tap him on the shoulder the angel gave Peter the order to dress and to follow him the iron gate opens automatically and Peter himself didn't know whether this was fact or fantasy he was going through at first but he soon realises well Herod's plot had been defeated and there was no small commotion the next morning among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter and after a thorough search to no avail the guards themselves were executed because in Roman law a jailer who allowed a prisoner in his charge to escape was liable to the penalty which the prisoner had been condemned so Herod's plot has been defeated and it has been defeated resoundingly by God hasn't it and now we see the ugliness of Herod's death as described by Luke in verses 20 through to 23 in those verses Herod leaves the region of Judea and heads down to

Caesarea which was the capital at the time and he stayed there and Luke now tells us the history behind the incident that he is about to relate in verse 20 Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon the two cities north of Jerusalem and on the west coast of that region and representatives of Tyre and Sidon came to Caesarea to seek an audience with Herod and after winning over Blastus the king's our chamberlain or the king's our personal trusted servant they asked for reconciliation or for peace because their country depended on Herod's country for food and so on well that's the background and the people do get to have their audience with Herod and we read in verse 21 on an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes took his seat on the platform and delivered a public address to them so he put on his royal robes now Josephus is a Jewish historian at the time and he adds that these royal robes were made wholly of silver and of a contexture truly wonderful and on the delivery of this public address in verse 22 we read the people kept on shouting the voice of a god and not a mortal and praising him giving him praise and all sorts of wonderful things and immediately because Herod had not given glory to God an angel of the

[15 : 54] Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died well this Jewish historian Josephus again records this same incident which is in his writings and concludes as Luke does here that God's judgment fell on Herod because Herod glorified himself and not God and Josephus again records that Herod was to die five days later because of a severe pain in his belly probably presuming because of the worms and so on and friends that is not a pleasant way to die because Herod did not seek to glorify God he was struck down by God now Herod the king presumably is dead but God still lives on doesn't he and in verse 24 we read perhaps the roller coaster it's at the bottom and we read in verse 24 that the word of God continued to advance and gain adherence the roller coaster is on its way up again so what has Acts chapter 12 got to say for us is it relevant and how do we understand it today and I think it's a very difficult passage to preach on but let me just add a few comments first of all let me start by saying that God is not dead in a passage such as this we see God's attitude towards those who are the pawns of

Satan and who attempt to stop the gospel by the sheer exercise of power Herod like the pharaoh in the Exodus long before him along with all others who through their own pride seek to oppose God's purposes and persecute God's people will inevitably suffer the same fate no king and no nation not even the mighty Roman empire will ever succeed in stopping the spread of the gospel and the kingdom of God indeed the nations will plot and rage the followers of Jesus will find themselves before Herods and Pharaohs but even if they lose their lives God's kingdom will always triumph for the Lord will strike them down in his own due time during the past week I've been down at the CMS summer school and I've been hearing about the wonderful ways in which the gospel of

Jesus Christ is impacting many places throughout the world the gospel has gone out to many places throughout the world we heard what's happening in Nepal in Africa in Egypt we heard about places where it is illegal to convert to Christianity we heard about people's lives being changed by the power of the gospel because God chooses to work through the people that he has placed in those places and God is doing a marvellous thing and we need to be praying fervently for those who serve God in this world indeed we need to be praying that God will continue to raise up people to go and serve him maybe even you or me I don't know and we also need to be serving God with our resources and so on and friends where it looks like God is not triumphing we can be sure that he is because God is sovereign and God is not dead now in our day and age

Pharaoh and Herod are not our cruelest oppressors are they I think the cruelest oppressor that we face is our own sin which renders us not only guilty before God but also which seems to hold us completely under its sway thus the spread of the word and the triumph of the kingdom of God is in one sense our exodus and that to which the first exodus pointed for Christ our king has come and he has applied to the doorposts if you like of his church his own blood which he shed for the remission of our sins and even now Christ our king is leading us through the desert by word and sacrament to an eternal rest where Christ is truly worshipped and adored so Moses need not have feared Pharaoh for the Lord struck him down didn't he Peter here in

Acts chapter 12 need not have feared Herod for the Lord struck him down didn't he and we need not fear the guilt of our sins and its power over us for Christ the Lord Jesus Christ has come to deliver us and the Lord struck the king of kings down so that we might live today the problem is not that God has abandoned us but that we have abandoned him as a result for many life is meaningless and ends up meaningless unless we repent of our foolishness so that we may enter into an eternity with him Tim Costello writes in his recent publication Streets of Hope about our modern world secularists have convinced us that

[21 : 43] God has left the phone off the hook the absence of spirit is acute the less sensitive seem comfortable in their smugness that nothing can touch their consumer affluence and look uncomprehendingly blank at the suggestion that we might submit to the awe and mystery of a divine spirit they want us not to believe in God the advent of crystals astrology charts and a plethora of new age courses and books and spirituality is a response to the arid tracts of technical reason we have experienced a wholesale cultural unplugging from a meaning mainframe and we compute life without any sense of direction or destiny I heard a speaker tease out the modern anguish with this snapshot a lifelong communist who had fanatically believed in the revolution and the inevitability of history moving towards a classless society lay dying on his deathbed he lost his lifelong faith he recanted his atheism and abandoned his belief in Marxism he called for the priest and was baptised abjuring all atheism and revolutionary fervour he died reconciled to

God and the church for him God was not dead isn't the Christian faith and hope so wonderful that it is worth the risk of stepping out of our cosy boundaries to tell others about him it will be a rollercoaster ride there's no doubt about that but God will always be there because God is the king let's pray our heavenly father we thank you and praise you that you are the king that you are the lord and we do indeed pray lord that where people say that you are dead that you would reveal yourself to them we pray that you would give us courage in our daily lives to promote and proclaim the truth of the gospel we pray lord god that in our rollercoaster life that we would know that you are always with us we pray that we would support one another in fellowship as we meet as we grow as a body of

Christ lord god we pray that your word would continue to show us daily truths of what it is to live and serve our lives for you we ask this in Jesus name and for his sake amen to amen to you