



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Scottish Charity No. SC006973

Reading Acts 12:1-19.

Sermon: 9 August 2009

The text for the sermon: verse 5

“⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” ¹

A minister who worked in the countryside and had mainly farmers in his congregation, once told me this story: He said that he initiated a special service with the sole purpose to pray for rain. Now I know, in this country it's really hard to imagine that people could actually *ask* for rain! But there are certain areas in SA that are very dry, and farmers need rain...

There was a wee lassie in church that day who couldn't understand why the service wasn't the same as every other Sunday, and her mom explained to her it was because it was a special service – everybody came to church to pray for rain. But now the wee girl was even more puzzled: *If all of them came to church to pray for rain, she asked her mom, why didn't anybody bring umbrellas with them?!*

That wee lassie believed that if you ask God for something, He would answer your prayer. Do we still believe that? Or are we sometimes so disillusioned by our circumstances that we pray without believing that it will really make a difference?

Our NT reading this morning was all about this: It was Passover, and Jews streamed into Jerusalem from all over for the festivities. The Romans, who ruled over the whole known world at that time, appointed Herod Agrippa I to rule over the Jews. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth.

And just like his granddad, this Herod would do almost anything to win the favour of the Jewish leaders. At that stage in history more and more people became Christians, and this large amount of Christians became a threat to the Jews. So Herod realized – the more Christians he persecuted, the more the Jews liked him.

So this is how it came that he sent Peter to jail. Herod appointed double the amount of guards than was the custom to guard Peter – two of these guards were even chained to Peter, so in Herod's mind there was absolutely no way that Peter could escape. Herod's plan was to deliver Peter out the people just after Passover, so that his fate could be exactly the same as that of Jesus. He believed that *that* would score him lots of points in the eyes of the Jewish leaders.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ac 12:5

But Herod didn't keep track with the power of God. The Christians secretly met in Mary's house, where they earnestly prayed for Peter.

And then, just like that, God answered their prayer – He set Peter free. Peter immediately went to Mary's house and knocked on the door, but when the servant-girl heard that it was Peter, she was so happy that she ran back to tell everybody the good news, without letting Peter in!

But nobody believed her. How could Peter be at the door – come on, he was in jail?! But God can do anything. While these people were praying for Peter, God released him from the jail, but *nobody* believed that *that* could be possible...

Wow – what a story! I think there are 2 very important lessons for us in this story: In the 1st place – we must never underestimate the power of prayer. If we ask something of God, we should believe that He *can* give it to us, even if this sometimes feels impossible.

But, God answers our prayers in his time and his manner – that is the second lesson. God has a plan with our lives, he does not allow anything to happen without a reason, and this we can see illustrated clearly in Peter's life.

I can just imagine how Peter must have prayed that God must protect him from being imprisoned by Herod. He worked really hard for the church and if he was imprisoned he would not be able to continue with this work. Surely God will take care of the people who work for him?

But God did not answer this prayer of Peter – He had other plans.

Peter must have been very disappointed in this God he worked so hard for, but on the evening before his planned persecution, Peter realized how powerful God really is.

If we take a look at the bigger picture, we can immediately realize why God let things happen this way. If he answered Peter's initial prayer, nobody else would ever know about that. But now there was not a single person who did *not* know what happened. God let a miracle take place in Peter's life, something that would make even more people believe in him.

This story illustrates that God knows what He does – even though it must have felt to Peter as if God had forgotten all about him, God clearly showed him that he never forgets his children. God showed Peter and all the Christians that it is more than worthwhile to believe in him...

And today, none of these things have changed. God still answers our prayers, but when and how it fits into his plan with us.

Therefore we should never allow our circumstances to discourage us. We must remember that whatever happens to us – God is using us.

The world we live in and all the bad and negative things that happen to us can easily effect us in such a manner that we start to pray like those Christians in Mary's house – praying without believing for one second that God will answer our prayers.

But we must never allow this to happen to us – we must always try to focus on the bigger picture. God still make miracles happen today, but we are usually so busy focussing on ourselves, that we don't often realize this.

Jesus also once prayed that God must please take the cup of suffering away from him – but God didn't. And the result of that was that all of us were saved.

So, let's believe that God knows what is best for us, that He can answer our prayers, and let's live like people who know that sometimes we can be God's answer to other people's prayers.

Amen

Reflection on prayer

Something that strikes me about us praying, is that we always end our prayers with "Your will be done", but if God does not grant us our will, we are disappointed in him. I think we sometimes use prayer exclusively to satisfy our own needs. But so many times what we want is not what we need. We can't pray for a Mercedes Benz if we do not even have a drivers licence! God gave us this wonderful opportunity to tell him how we feel and what we think we need, so next time when we say "Your will be done", let's believe that that is the very best thing we can ask for!

Prayer

Dear Lord

Please forgive us

for not always praying for the right reasons

Please forgive us

for asking for things

without always taking the consequences our wishes might have for

others into consideration

Please forgive us

For sometimes wanting more than we are prepared to give

Amen.