

SERMON – 14 August 2016

Reading – Acts 12:1-19

The text for the sermon is verse 5: “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

Last week at the Holiday Club, we took all the children on a journey through Peter’s life. I started the Holiday Club with the Service last week focussing on Peter the Rock who vowed that he loved Jesus.

A close friend of Jesus, who saw and experienced amazing things; but also just an ordinary guy, who didn’t *always* get it right.

But if there is one thing we can say about Peter, it is that he was devoted to God. Jesus trusted him to spread the message of God’s love, and he did everything in his power to do just that.

So it must have been a really hard blow for him when he ended up in prison. Not because he committed a crime, but because the authorities didn’t like what he was saying about Jesus...

They also made sure that there was absolutely no way humanly possible for him to escape. 4 sets of 4 guards... 2 guards were chained to him, 2 were standing at the door. Around the clock.

I can just imagine him praying to God... Firstly, obviously, to *not* be caught by the authorities, because he was doing so well spreading the Gospel! But that didn’t work out for him. Then he probably prayed for a way to escape, but when those guards were chained to him, he probably started to accept that he was going to die soon.

If it was me I would probably feel disappointed that God didn’t answer my prayers, especially after working so hard for him... But if Peter was thinking that God forgot about him, he was making a mistake. God didn’t answer those prayers of Peter, because he was busy answering the prayers of Peter’s fellow Christians.

Because, in the meantime, Peter’s fellow Christians all met in secret and prayed fervently for Peter. The Greek word used for “prayed fervently” is the same word that described Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, it relates to a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits.

Have you ever prayed like that?

In any case, all these people were praying, fervently, all through the night, for Peter to be released. The next minute there’s a knock on the door. It’s Peter.

“No way”, they say, that’s impossible! He is in jail. When the servant girl ran into the room saying that she heard Peter at the door, leaving him standing outside, his friends and fellow believers said to her: “You are out of your mind!”

Can you see what’s happening here? They are praying for Peter to be released. God answers their prayer, sends an angel to rescue him miraculously, and not one single person, even for a second, considers that their prayer might have been answered!

They prayed with heart and soul, but they didn’t really believe that it would make a difference...

Wow – what a story! I think there are 3 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.

And then the 3rd lesson: conversation with God always means relationship. You cannot talk to someone else meaningfully without having a relationship with that person. The same is true of God.

God made it possible in and through Jesus to have a relationship with Him founded on the strong belief that He took away all our sins, and the living hope to know that in faith we belong to Him, in life and death!

And because we have a relationship with Him, it means we can talk to and with Him wherever we are. We cannot gossip about Him or even talk about Him behind His back because He always listens and is present all around us through His Holy Spirit. So actually whenever we think of God, without saying one word, we are praying!

And prayer is all about attitude. We must not get carried away in the sense that everything we pray for will miraculously appear. Prayer is never about the outcome but about speaking to and with God. And whenever a prayer is answered we need to rejoice and be grateful because God gives us what we need and not what we want! Prayer is not a marketing exercise where we need to impress God. He knows our hearts already, which reminds me of the story of the boy who was naughty and being sent to his room. A short time later he came out and said to his mum, "I've been thinking about what I did and I said a prayer." "That's fine," she said, "if you ask God, He will help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me to be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you to put up with me." (Our Daily Bread, June 15)

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 affect 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 makes 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