



July 12<sup>th</sup> 2020  
Reflections on Acts 12

Like all scripture we can only understand these verses in context. And as ever there are on-the-surface contexts and deep-below contexts.

Firstly, remember what's been happening in Acts as regards the Church. She's suffered persecution from the start. At first the Apostles were targeted, but then the focus switched to others, with Saul eager, with murderous thoughts, to wipe out the whole Church. Yet the Church grows. And C's 10 and 11 bring us to the wonderful event from the Gospel point of view, which is seen as an appalling event from the Temple point of view, Gentiles, the unclean, the uncircumcised, the destined subjects of the wrath of God, representatives of the despised Roman rule, are brought into the Church. The way of the Church threatens the established order of the ways of the Temple.

And there is the running sore of the kingdom and Jerusalem being ruled by Rome. Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great, who was not a true Jew, was brought up in Rome. He became friends with future Roman emperors, who appointed him king of areas of Israel, even in AD 41 over Judea and Jerusalem. And now three years later, as we know from history – not from Luke, who gives us little in the way of calendar dates, in AD44, Herod Agrippa, who always tried to keep in with the Temple, kills James, and discovers this is pleasing to the Jews. So he then designs to kill Peter. This is PC politics – by cutting off the head of the head of the Church, he will both improve his relationship with the Temple power and strengthen his kingship over Israel.

From 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel to modern Britain's promotion of secular values that deny Christian principles to the outright antagonism of North Korea, nations and rulers persistently resist the Kingship of Christ Jesus. Yet what never seems to be remembered is that those who live like Herod will be judged like Herod.

What of Peter and the Church? This is the second time that Peter is released from jail by an angel [see C5]. But now, instead of being told to go and preach, he is led to seek escape to another place. *[Luke gives no clue as what that place is.]* Christians are not to seek martyrdom, though like James it may seek them. *[That Christ allows James to be killed reminds us that He is sovereign, His ways are not our ways. Death stalks us all, but yet James lives.]* The Church, while Peter sleeps in quiet trust in the Lord *[see how he has grown in faith since the storm rocked the boat on the lake!]* is earnestly praying for him.

By the by. It's very strange to us that when Rhoda tells the Church that Peter is at the door, they say 'it must be his angel'. Their words reflect an idea in then Jewish thought that people have guardian angels, who may even come to look like the person they are guarding. The Church, was praying earnestly for it feared that Herod would kill Peter. And perhaps at Rhoda's words their fears, at the end of a week of prayer and a long night of prayer, leapt to the conclusion that Peter's angel had come to tell them that Herod had killed Peter.

Fascinating though that may be, the more significant point for us is that the Church was earnestly praying. That's the description of Jesus in Gethsemane; that's the way Jesus in His parables calls His people to pray; and that was what His Church was doing. The Church believed that earnest prayer makes a difference. That is what Jesus teaches – ask, seek, knock – and that's what Jesus practised in Gethsemane. If prayer does not make a difference, why did Jesus pray so earnestly that He sweated blood in Gethsemane? Of course, the Church knew, as Jesus experienced in Gethsemane that our prayers are not always answered. But she also knew that if there is no praying there can never be any answering. Prayer is faith speaking heart to heart with the Lord. They prayed for Peter to be released and Peter is released. How that prayer answer must have encouraged their future prayer practice.

Chapter 12 is set in the midst of the Church's response to the prophetic news that a severe famine will affect the whole Roman world. That inspires the Church in Antioch to collect gift-aid for the Church in Jerusalem. Luke tells us at the end of C11 that Barnabas and Saul are entrusted with taking the gift to Jerusalem. And he informs us at the end of C12 that 'when Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem...' to Antioch. Herod Agrippa must also have been aware of the famine. Perhaps that was the cause of his quarrel with the people of Tyre and Sidon? 'They depended on the king's country for their food supply'. Perhaps Herod had been holding back their supply in the interests of his own people? But see how Herod treats their concerns. The Church gathers a gift. Herod gathers the people to a meeting. He gathers royal robes around himself. He gives a speech. He gathers the people's praise: 'this is the voice of a god, not a man.' Herod should have diverted the praise from himself to God, but he gathers it to his own celebrity. And for his idolatry an angel of the Lord strikes him down. Power-lovers of the world beware!

This points us to a deeper context. Jesus came to destroy the devil's works [1John c3 v8b]. The devil's work is not confined to blighting people's individual lives. The devil dis-eases social, economic and political structures. People suffer because society, in all its aspects is sick. When Jesus healed people he was breaking down those societal evils. Consider the homely healing of Peter's

mother-in-law. In restoring her health, Jesus restored her to domestic honour. His eating and drinking with sinners breaks the traditional holiness protocols and His healing on the Sabbath breaks the traditional religious conventions. Jesus subverts the power of the accepted social rules and their rule makers. Not out of an anti-social spirit but out of a deliberate transforming intention to bring the world under His Father's rule. An intention won, not lost, on the cross, for the cross is God's victory over all that is evil – His Kingdom is coming in and will one day be the all in all of a new creation, in which evil is no more. The Gospel is not only, and certainly not just an offer of personal healing, it's an offer and a promise of societal shalom – all creation will be healed, all will be well, all will be very well.

Jesus wasn't killed on the cross because He healed people. He was killed on the cross because by all his actions He challenged the status quo and the politics of how things were. He confronted the status rulers with the higher demands of God, when all they really wanted was just to get on and carry on in their own way.

God's mission is to restore creation to His universal rule. The Good News is personal and also familial, communal, social, economic and political. To proclaim Jesus is Lord is to say nothing less. If He is Lord of our lives and all life then we are no longer to be ruled by the lesser lords of the world. The Church, that is all Christians, must judge whether it is right in God's sight to obey the commands of rulers or to obey Him [Acts 4:19] We cant try to serve both [Matthew 6:24].

Luke tells us after Herod Agrippa's life comes to its idolatrous end that 'the word of God continued to increase and spread'. And then he writes of Barnabas and Saul's return to Antioch with Mark. That's a pivotal event in Luke's aim in Acts, to show us that Jesus is Lord over all the earth, not the power brokers of empire and temple, but the crucified living Christ. Through the irresistible increase and spread of the word: Rome was delivered from Caesar; Gentiles came into the Kingdom; the End beckons. The Cross is God's promise that the wrong of the world will be defeated. The Herods do not win the day. Rather the day is won by the way of love and the arms of grace, through the word of God proclaiming in words and actions to all oppressing powers and all oppressed people the healing, saving, redemptive well-being of the Kingship of God.

As a Church we are called to pray for that; we are called to live in and for and by that, and even to die for that – if not in physical martyrdom, then in making our lives living sacrifices seeking to do what pleases God. And isn't that for each of us and for all of us bound together in the Church of Christ, a faith, a life, a God worth living for! Amen.