

'The Hidden Hand At Work' – Acts 12 - 03/02/19

I'm not asking for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us have ever turned our eyes heavenward and screamed at God either out loud or internally 'Where on earth are You?' 'If you're really there why is everything such a mess?'

I remember December 2010 vividly. It was the year my Dad had died quite suddenly, our elder daughter was quite unwell, work was challenging and things were difficult at church, our central heating boiler had given up the ghost and then our trusty Skoda broke down and was beyond economical repair, to top it all we were waist high in snow, and my early ordered Christmas presents were at the bottom of the pile at Woodmill sorting office with little hope of re-emergence before the 25th. I was not in a good place and my conversations with God, when they happened at all, were not happy ones.

Maybe you're in that place today with your own life or a friend's or family member's? Maybe you've been in that place but even now that things are ok, your happiness is marred by fear of returning to it? Sometimes circumstances crowd in on us and it's difficult to see how our belief in God is making any difference. Could we be missing something?

It is very possible that at the beginning of today's passage in Acts the newly formed Christian Church in Jerusalem was also asking 'Where are You God?' These were dark days but watch out for the hidden hand of God at work. Let's read

Acts 12 1-25.

Did you notice God at work- you could hardly miss it! –This morning we'll take a deeper look at this passage and see how, even when things appear desperate and dark and God seems absent, He is at work, holding us in His hands, answering prayer in ways we could not imagine, and clearing obstacles from our paths –ultimately to bring glory to Him. And hopefully we will realise that no matter how grim circumstances are we can live our lives with a deep-rooted joy in the knowledge that our loving God is in control

I'm sure for most of us, the middle part of the passage is the familiar bit – so let's start there. As I said these are dark times for the church in Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa is the Grandson of the Herod who ruled at the birth of Jesus and ordered the death of all baby boys near Bethlehem. He was only 3 when his father had been murdered by His Grandfather and when he grew up he got into trouble in Rome. Eventually Caligula appointed him King over Northern Palestine. He was a true politician working to keep the Romans and the Jews happy for his own personal gain, but these Christians were disrupting the equilibrium.

He arrested and beheaded James (we'll come back to this) and that had gone down so well with the Jews that now he has arrested Peter and once Passover is finished, he too will be beheaded. Herod is determined there is to be no escape and Peter has 4 soldiers guarding him at all times, one chained to each hand and the other 2 on the doors.

How must Peter be feeling - Peter the man of action and word, bold and brave, but he's no Ethan Hunt or Jack Reacher and the special forces aren't scaling the walls – he knows what happened to James and escape truly looks like a Mission Impossible. So what is Peter doing the night before his execution – crying out for mercy? engaging in agonising prayer, pacing the cell with a guard on each side? No, we are told he is sleeping. Indeed, the Message says, 'Paul was sleeping like a Baby'. Now I was lucky enough the other week to visit my niece's baby who was less than a day old and hold in my arms a bundle of contentment, sleeping at peace, completely dependent, trusting his every need would be met.

That was Peter that night. He knew that, despite appearances, God was holding Him in His hands.

If you've experienced that kind of peace it will be at the forefront of your mind right now. For me it happened - and I know many of you already know the story - when I fell off my bike 4 years ago. There I was in hospital, back broken, 2 in the morning and the consultant had just sat by my bed and told me the next 6 months of my life would be hell and btw about 1/3 of the people with my type of injury never returned to work.

The words washed over me. There was absolutely nothing I could do – physically I couldn't move – and I mean really couldn't move -flat on my back, at risk of paralysis if I did, dependent on 4 people. I don't remember praying just experiencing a sense of total calm and over the 10 days that followed I listened again and again to Casting Crowns :

Your world's not falling apart it's falling into place,

I'm on the throne, stop holding on and Just be held.

That's where Peter was that night, he knew He was being prayed for. Anyone looking in saw a condemned man chained to 2 soldiers, but Peter was cocooned in the hands of God. If he was rescued, that was fine. If he was taken like James, that was fine.

We too can all find that ultimate sense of peace, but we need to surrender totally trusting in our loving God. Sometimes that is easier when circumstances are totally out with our control and there is nowhere else to turn but at any time we can let go of our angst, our fears our daily concerns and, although we may not see them– God's hands will hold us and sustain us in a way that is beyond our understanding.

That awareness of God's hidden hand can change our entire outlook on life. It does not necessarily mean we will see things work out the way we hoped, but to acknowledge that

someone else is control and to trust the decisions we have to make and the steps we have to take to Him will truly set us free from the bonds this life ties around us - concerns about family, our health, our jobs, our finances – everything that steals our joy and that bound me back in December 2010.

And if you need an illustration of this, it is right here - with Peter surrendered into his hands, God literally sets him free. The dramatic story unfolds (retell as much as need be depending on kids talk)

Even when we think we are in the most impossible situations God's hand is at work.

Sometimes we simply have to trust because God's work is hidden from us but other times, I think it is us who put up the screens and miss what God is doing.

There's Peter banging on the door and inside the people who are praying don't believe it can possibly be him! Now when I was reading in preparation for this sermon some commentators stated that the pray-ers were 'faithless' or 'unbelieving' but I don't see it like that. They are said to be praying 'earnestly' and I understand it is the same word used to describe how Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. They were in grave danger - one of their number had just been beheaded but they had gathered together to cry out to God for Peter. I wonder what they were praying – was it for peace for Peter, was it to keep him strong, was it to change Herod's mind. God heard and answered their prayers for Peter but clearly not in the way they were expecting! Even when they opened the door they were 'astonished' to see him standing there.

Are we guilty of limiting what we think God can do – do we miss answers to prayers and fail to give God the glory for the incredible way he works both in the small things in our lives and in the wider world?

I remember way back when I was part of a D(discipleship)12 group and Lillian Gutteridge let us see her note book where she recorded her daily prayers on one side and the answers on the other. Some parts took longer than others to complete but she saw God at work in every aspect of her life. I've always meant to do this and maybe I should make a commitment to it now. Will you join me? We would be always alert to God's hand at work so often hidden by our own interpretations or unwillingness to attribute outcomes to Him.

And what about God's work in the wider world? I often hear people bemoaning how difficult it is to share God's word these days because schools, local authorities, commercial outlets are all against us. I know there have been some high-profile examples of this in recent years, but my experience is the opposite. Look at us here in Gillespie, our F3 project is supported actively and financially by Fife Council, we have a seat at the local poverty action group and our opinion is heeded and respected, our local shopping centre allowed Oasis to occupy a unit free of charge for several

years and offered Dunfermline churches the opportunity to provide Children's activities at Christmas 2018 – an offer we hope will be made and taken up at Easter. In my work as an Outreach worker in Lochgelly/Benarty I have gently pushed at the doors of 3 schools and have found them opened wide with a genuine willingness to partner with the local church. Are these examples of God at work answering prayers yet going almost unacknowledged?

As we pray for the wider church at this difficult time and for an important meeting of Dunfermline Presbytery this Thursday let us do so without boundaries and with minds which believe God will revive His church and which are truly open to however He may choose to do it.

So we have seen God's hidden hand holding us, answering prayer and in the final section we see it removing an obstacle to the spreading of His word.

Now, call me a lily livered liberal if you like but I would really much prefer that after Peter is freed, Herod recognises the power of God, stops persecuting the Christians and there is much smiling and shaking of hands as the credits begin to roll. But life isn't like that. Herod puts all the guards to death then heads off to meet the people of Tyre and Sidon who are trying to win favour to secure their food supplies. He sits on his throne in his grand royal robes and the people start calling him a god. He is clearly relishing the attention and does nothing to disabuse them. Almost immediately he is taken ill and is eaten by worms and dies. There are far more graphic versions of the story in contemporary writings if you're interested. There is no doubt in Luke's mind that this is God at work clearing the obstacle which could no longer be tolerated, and it had the desired effect for we are told at verse 23 'the word of God continued to increase and spread'.

Perhaps you, like me at the moment, almost avoid the news because it fills you with dread and anxiety for the future. Yet this passage shows us that we can trust that somewhere in all of this, God's hidden hand is at work and that ultimately, He will prevail and his radical message of immeasurable love embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus will once again 'increase and spread' in this country and across the globe.

So, this passage shows a radical reversal from the dark, desperate days at its opening to the deliverance of Peter, the death of Herod and the unstoppable spread of the gospel. God's hidden hand at work.

But what you may well ask about poor James? Where was God's hand when his head was sliced off by the sword? Why was Peter spared and not James? After all, this was James, the brother of John, close friend of Jesus, one of only 3 of the disciples to be with Jesus at the transfiguration. Well, we just don't know. But Paul might have argued that James in fact got the better part. As he

said in Philippians 1:21 'For me to live is Christ to die is gain'. It can be hard for us with our feet firmly rooted on earth to grasp this concept.

John no doubt grieved his brother and in the 50 years he lived after his death probably not a day passed when he didn't think of him - just as we think of our loved ones who have passed.

But John had lived and walked alongside Jesus. He had heard the life transforming stories He told, he had witnessed the 5000 being fed, the blind having their sight restored, Jairus daughter brought back to life. He had seen Jesus crucified - then ate breakfast with Him after his resurrection. John lived with the certainty that Jesus had restored his relationship with God and that death would not be the end. And so, he could be sure that he would be reunited with James in heaven and those 50 years would be but a moment in the eternity they would then inhabit.

Do we live our lives from that place of certainty? Do we trust that God's plan is unfolding, that His hand is at work, answering prayer, clearing obstacles, even when life is really tough? Will we today allow our heavenly Father to hold us and from that place of surrender let Him open our minds to His unfathomable greatness so that we see our temporal, fleeting lives in the context of eternity and His everlasting glory?

For then, no matter our grief, our pain, our hardships, we can find a joy and a peace which passes all understanding.