**27th July 2014**

**Acts 12**

Twenty years ago Debbie and I had just got married and we decided to take a September holiday back packing around Turkey. One day we decided to walk round an abandoned village, up a hill, around a cliff and then down to the sea and a popular tourist beach. We set off in blistering heat. The temperature must have been around 40 degrees – 100 Fahrenheit in old money. We were woefully under equipped and underprepared. Neither of us wore hats, we were carrying only one bottle of water. We walked on and on. We scrambled down a cliff to the sea but the path had disappeared and we seemed stranded in this lonely deserted cove. The only way back was to scramble up the cliff again but by now we were out of water, de-hydrating, to the extent that Debbie was feeling faint and starting to hallucinate. In other words, we were in a tight spot.

I let out a desperate prayer of Lord Help us…’ within minutes a speedboat coasted past our cove. I shouted loudly and waved my arms in a distressed, this is an emergency kind of way. The boat came over to us and although the two men in the boat couldn’t speak English I was able to convey the seriousness of our situation. They got us on board and took us to a yacht. It was the type of yacht you would expect a multi-millionaire to own and indeed as we arrived there were a number of very attractive topless women sunbathing on deck. I was starting to feel better at this point (!) particularly as they gathered around and offered us drinks. The boat men talked with their boss who agreed to drop us off on the nearest tourist beach. So we sped on in the speed boat and made an assault on a very popular tourist beach. It was a scene out of James Bond – lots of people sunbathing being interrupted by a speed boat out of which an inappropriately dressed British couple traipsed through the middle of them.

It was a lucky escape and a bizarre episode. We have had a number of them in our lives. Maybe you have too.

Our Bible story today tells the story of a lucky escape for the apostle Peter. Except that the word ‘lucky’ is inappropriate. ‘Luck’ implies blind chance, your fate in the stars or whatever. Peter’s escape was down to God’s providence – God providing for him the means to be rescued.

I had prayed for God’s help in that deserted Turkish cove. We had been rescued. Call it coincidence if you want – but I was grateful to God for our deliverance – the topless women were an additional bonus. William Temple a former Archbishop of Canterbury once said that when I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't.’

So let’s take a moment to unpack this story then I’ll muse on God’s providence: God’s provision and help to us and some of the issues that raises.

First of all a brief recap on this story. In the last few weeks we have been looking at the story of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles – what happened next after Jesus had been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven and then sent his disciples out as witnesses to the gospel. Two weeks ago we heard how Peter had raised Tabitha, or Dorcas, from the dead. Last week we heard how his encounter with a Gentile, a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius, had changed his beliefs and changed his mission when he saw how the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. He explains all this to the other apostles back in Jerusalem, who despite initially criticising him decide that if God has granted this to the Gentiles who could oppose God’s initiative.

In chapter 12 of Acts, Peter is again the centre of the action. King Herod, (no not that pantomime figure from Christmas story but his grandson), decided the Christians were becoming a threat and decided to persecute them.

Why did Herod persecute Christians? There was no sign that the Christian movement by this stage was fermenting anything that could be described as a rebellion or political threat. It was strongly in Herod’s interests to show his Roman overlords that he would not tolerate dangerous movements developing under his nose and to show his own people he would stand up against anything that threatened their ancestral traditions. Certainly a movement that stakes a claim for Jesus being the true Messiah, the king of the Jews, would always niggle at the present incumbent of that title – ‘King’ Herod – would be eager to prove that he was the true ‘King’. But this story, like many others in the Bible would show that there is only one true King.

Herod kills James the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee – but one of the apostles. The first apostle to be martyred in the bible. He was a minor leader – so the tactic by Herod was knock off a lesser player, see if the crowds like it, and if they do, go for one of the big guns. Now he pursues Peter.

We are constantly aware of Christians being persecuted in today’s world. Christians in the Middle East, in places such as Iraq, Syria and Palestine, have recently been in the news. This week the Sudanese woman who was spared a death sentence for renouncing Islam has met the Pope.Meriam Ibrahim flew to Rome with her family after more than a month in the US embassy in Khartoum. There was global condemnation when she was sentenced to hang for apostasy by a Sudanese court. A million people in Britain joined Amnesty International’s campaign to free her.

Mrs Ibrahim's father is Muslim so according to Sudan's version of Islamic law she is also Muslim and cannot convert. She was raised by her Christian mother. Mrs Ibrahim met Pope Francis at the Vatican soon after her arrival in Italy.

"The Pope thanked her for her witness to faith," in a meeting, which was intended to show "closeness and solidarity for all those who suffer for their faith,"

Whilst unhappy to leave Sudan her life is in danger so she feels she has to leave. Just two days ago a group called Hamza made a statement that they would kill her and everyone who helps her. Last week, her father's family filed a lawsuit trying to have her marriage annulled, on the basis that a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim.

Many of you have hostility from within your own family to being part of a Christian Church. Many of us receive mocking at work, gentle and not so gentle sarcastic remarks about our faith, either from those who think we haven’t got a brain and are just being infantile, to those who think we are all potential child abusers. The cases of Christians whose actual lives are at risk should give us perspective on our own situations and hopefully encourage us to stand firm for our faith, in solidarity with those who are prepared to give up their lives for what they believe, but hopefully not to kill others for what they believe.

Peter is imprisoned during the Feast of Unleavened Bread – Passover. Echoes of the trial of Jesus here. He is kept in prison but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. We can think too much about prayer. Rationally, it has so many logical contradictions and difficulties. Yet the testament of the church down the centuries is that God answers earnest prayer. Like a lot of faith, by all means have the doubts and the questions, but don’t let them paralyse you from acting in faith. Go do. Go pray.

Here’s what happens in Peter’s story that illuminates the faith and the doubt of those believers.

The night before the trial God sends an angel to Peter, unchaining him and leading him out of the prison cell and into the streets. Peter thinks he is dreaming until they get to the house of the Mary, the mother of John Mark where many believers had gathered in prayer for Peter. Peter knocks at the door and a servant girl Rhoda answers. She recognises Peter’s voice and leaves him waiting at the door and goes back and tells the others. They believe she is out of her mind. Rhoda insists she is not. They say it must be his angel.

Peter is still outside the house knocking on the door. Someone one please let him in! Eventually they do and realise that it is the man in person and all are astonished.

They had been praying of his release – and yet did not have the faith to believe that their prayers would actually be answered. They had been praying earnestly for his release and here they are o full of faith, so trusting in God, that when Rhoda says Peter is at the door, they tell she is mad! And then when she insists, they tell her she’s misinterpreted the voice and that if it is Peter he must be already dead and addressing them from beyond the grave.

Now I find all this strangely comical (like out of a Monty Python sketch) and also comforting.

Luke is allowing us to see the early church for a moment, not as a bunch of great heroes and heroines of the faith, but as the same kind of muddled, half believing, faith- one-minute and doubt-the-next sort of people as most Christians we all know are. So take heart. But having said that, don’t forgot – they did pray at the outset. They may have doubted that their prayers would be answered and then were shocked and disbelieving when those prayers were answered – but at least they prayed at the outset. And they prayed earnestly.

You may have thought the church would have taken a little more direct action against the injustice of Herod imprisoning Peter. Would they have taken up the sword, as Peter did when Jesus was arrested? No - at least they have learnt from that. The power of the church is the power of prayer – a seemingly impotent force against the might of King Herod and is legions of soldiers. But this story is evidence that prayers wins out.

Today we look to the state to protect us. The state to guarantee our defence. The state holds for us the power of life and death. Who can take on the power of Parliament, County Hall, and Town Hall? Can you understand the tiny band of Christian believers huddled together behind closed doors fearful of the evil Herod and his soldiers, praying against the odds that any power, never mind the power of God could prevail?

Yet this is the time of Passover – the feast to remember God delivering his people from slavery at the time of Moses. This is Passover – a time to remember Jesus being delivered from death to resurrection. That memory will still be vivid for those believers. No wonder they prayed in faith, even though they waited in doubt.

The Reformed faith has seen God’s providence in two ways. A general providence – God’s sustains the world, sets the laws of nature in place and gives us life. Then there is God’s special providence. Where God is personally involved in acting within creation and especially with human beings. Answers to prayer, interventions, miracles, moments of guidance all come in this category. The God of the Bible does all things. It affirms that God is intimately involved in creation but is not part of creation. That our world is not determined by fate or chance but God is the author and sustainer of life.

When it comes to prayer John Calvin the Reformer saw God‘s providence sometimes working through an intermediary – in answer to prayer, sometimes contrary to an intermediary and sometimes without an intermediary. God is sovereign in other words. But as God commands us to pray it is apparent from scripture that often God uses our requests to shape the world and do his will. The doctrine of providence assures us that prayer is significant and that in and through our prayers God is at work.

But let’s put a word of caution here. This story of deliverance in Acts 12 is one of many in the Bible and we can expect these stories to have filled the first Christians and subsequent generations with hope. But would these stories of miraculous deliverance possibly also have the opposite effect. Accounts of a deliverance and liberation as a result of the answer to prayer might have a boomerang effect against the claimant. They can fuel despair as much as hope. A person told by a television evangelist that ‘if you really have faith, you will be healed’ is vulnerable to despair if healing does not come.

A while ago I was able to help someone in desperate need. We were able to give him some financial assistance from our benevolent fund. But part of their story was the tragic death of one of their children. At the funeral the vicar said that God had taken their child for a reason. They found that expression offensive and it had caused them to turn their backs on the Christian faith and the ministry of the church.

It reminded me of a story of the great US preacher William Sloane Coffin at the funeral of his own son who had died tragically in a mountaineering accident. The minister conducting the funeral said to the assembled congregation, ‘we must accept what has happened to this young man as the will of God.’

At that, William Sloan Coffin stood and shouted, ‘the hell it was God’s will! When my son died, God was the first one who cried!’

Was he right? Are tragedies the will of God? Or are they simply manifestations of what has gone wrong in the world? Are not tragedies what God sent his Son into the world to undo? God loves us too much to will suffering into our lives. The Bible says that God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3.9). Paul says that in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8.28). No one can say you are suffering because… Bad things do happen to good people. But in God’s providential purposes, when evil and suffering come upon us, we can believe God is still with us and that God’s loving grace and power will see us through.

In this passage, Peter is rescued but then Herod commands that the prison guards are executed for having let their prisoner escape. Good news for Peter and an answer to prayer. Not so good news for the prison guards.

Peter will go and end up in prison again and this time he will die for his faith: legend has it he is crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord. There is good historical evidence to suggest that his remains lie under St Peter’s in Rome. Peter was saved now – but not later.

There is enough therefore, even in this short story to give us confidence in prayer and God’s providence, but to temper that confidence with realism and humility. Peter escaped the long arm of Herod and was spared for yet another day of preaching the good news – but for a time only. The gospel continues unhindered, even though the bearers of the gospel may not.

Have confidence and trust in God, but that confidence should also be realistic and humble. We’re not God. God is sovereign. Herod likes to think he is God and the response to such silly presumption is that Herod becomes food for worms by the end of the chapter. God is not nice to those who try to be like God. Hitler perishes, huddled in a bunker. Mussolini is hung upside down. Saddam is found in a sewer. Thus ever to tyrants. Next to this ugly scene of Herod’s demise Luke adds: ‘meanwhile the word of God continued to grow and spread’.

God will always have the last word. And there in a nutshell is the Reformed understanding of God’s providence and our confidence, our hope and our joy. Whatever happens God will always have the last word.