

22. May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“Martyrdom of James and liberation of Peter”

Acts 12: 1-10

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your mantle around you and follow me.” And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him.

After a period of calm in Jerusalem, persecutions broke out again. This time, they were initiated by King Herod Agrippa I, whose death will shortly be recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. In today's passage, we hear that he had some members of the Church arrested and mistreated. Among them was the apostle James, the brother of John, whom he even had beheaded.

What could have moved Herod to commit such crimes against believers who could pose no threat to him? Scripture suggests the motive: when the king noticed that his atrocities against the Christians pleased the Jews, he had Peter arrested as well. Indeed, Herod, who had been made king by the Roman emperors Caligula and Claudius, was

trying to win over the influential conservative circles of Judaism by strict observance of Jewish law. This must have been the main reason for persecuting the young Christian community in Jerusalem.

Peter was placed under severe custody and then presented to the people. Certainly the intention was to kill him as well. If so, the young church would have lost two of its leading apostles. But God did not allow it. The Church prayed unceasingly to the Lord for him, and God responded by sending an angel to miraculously free Peter from prison.

While James, the brother of John, became the first martyred apostle, the Lord preserved Peter from an early death so that he could continue the mission He had entrusted to him. We cannot know God's wisdom well enough to understand why He makes this or that decision. However, we do know that the blood of the martyrs is seed for the Church. Certainly this applies in a special way to the first martyred apostle, whose death will have served the Church in a way that only God knows.

After being freed by the angel, Peter first had to be convinced that it was not a vision or a dream, but that his deliverance was a real event. This is how the account in the Acts of the Apostles continues:

And Peter came to himself, and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

In the meantime, 'there was no small stir among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.' (v. 18). Herod could not find him and went down to Caesarea, where his unjust reign was ended by divine intervention. This is how the Acts of the Apostles describes his end:

"Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and they came to him in a body, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and made an oration to them. And the people shouted, "The voice of a god, and not of man!" Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he did not give God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and died."

What a difference between the death of a godly man - in this case the apostle James, who gives his life in selfless service to the Lord of heaven and earth - and that of an ungodly king, who sheds innocent blood just to maintain his power and even allows himself to be worshipped as if he were a god!

While the death of the former was permitted by God so that his blood would bear fruit for the mission of the Church, the death of the latter was a relief for the persecuted Christians. This king could no longer hinder the spread of the Gospel. Thus concludes the passage from the Acts of the Apostles: *'The word of God grew and multiplied.'* (v. 24).

Meditation on the day's reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/listening-to-god-2/>

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/remain-in-my-love/>