

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



Sanctuary Windows (Upper North Side)

St Peter in Chains

Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Lent



The Angel comes to free St Peter from Prison

The inscription on the panelling beneath the windows reads
*To the glory of God, the above window was erected as a Thank-offering
by Juliana Frances Birch 1890.*

Miss Birch, aged 40, was listed as a Mission Sister,
lodging at 15 Paxton Road. She died in Dorset in 1917.

Reading: Acts 12:1-17

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, 'Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.' He did so. Then he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.'

Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'

As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel.' Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

Commentary

The Chapel Royal in the Tower of London is called 'St Peter ad Vincula' (St Peter in chains). The present building dates from 1520 and it is the parish church of the Tower. Its dedication, of course, refers to our reading today and St Peter's imprisonment in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa. Also, to the fact that the Tower was a prison for many years and the Chapel itself a burial place for some of the more famous prisoners who were beheaded there - such as Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard, Lady Jane Grey, St Thomas More, St John Fisher and Thomas Cromwell.

The first Vicar of St Michael's, Fr Wilson, who organised the building of the church, had in mind that its stained-glass windows would represent stories of angels throughout the Bible. Unfortunately, his vision was never fully implemented. Yet here, high up on the north side of the sanctuary, we have several of those stories, of which St Peter in prison is one.

We hear in the account that it is Herod Agrippa who had imprisoned Peter. Born Marcus Julius Agrippa, he was sent to Rome as child, by his grandfather Herod the Great, and educated alongside the future Emperor Claudius. Later, he became a friend of Caligula. As a result, Agrippa became King of Judea with territory covering most of Palestine, making him one of the most powerful kings of the East. Despite his chequered past, Agrippa became very devout and determined to restore the fortunes of the Jews, which meant he was held in great regard by the Pharisees and the Jewish people. A policy of repression against a suspicious, recently formed sect would therefore make sense, though Agrippa's motive is never explicitly stated in the Book of Acts.

What we do know from the Book of Acts is that Agrippa had one of the leaders of this sect executed, probably to make an example. This was James, the brother of John, and the first of the apostles to be martyred. It is an indication of an increasing tension between 'Christians' and their fellow Jews: of rising opposition and of an increasing distinction between the two. It would take the influx of Gentiles though to bring this relationship to breaking point.

This is the context for the imprisonment of Peter, probably in the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem (which abutted the Temple) and his miraculous release. Acts describes a shining angelic presence who prods Peter awake, is concerned about Peter being wrapped up in his cloak and who is in complete charge of what happens.

The house of John Mark's mother must have been a large dwelling, as it has an outer gate, a maidservant, and it was big enough 'for many' to gather. Here we hear tell of one of the earliest Jerusalem 'house churches,' and the names of some of the earliest Christians: Mary who owned the building and Rhoda, her servant.

Meditation

The great 18th century hymn writer, Charles Wesley, wrote a personal reflection on this story in the hymn 'And can it be?' He begins by asking: 'And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?'

Why should I be interested in Jesus Christ? What is the point of Jesus? When the disciples ask Jesus such questions, He answered 'I tell you the solemn truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain... If anyone wants to serve me, he must follow me, and where I am, my servant will be too...' (John 12:24-26)

Basically, He is saying to them, 'Look what happens to me next, how I will die on a cross and rise again.' When Jesus is lifted up for all to see –

visible to the whole world in his brokenness and suffering, the public display of God's reckless compassion for the world – then you will get the point, then you will see what it is all about.

This is a story that opens doors for every human being everywhere, a story of God's love, compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness in the midst of suffering, pain and brokenness. This is the story of a new way of being human, of another way of living life.

What is the point of Jesus? What is His meaning? Love is his meaning! As we see in His life, death and Resurrection, here is one who gives his life so that others may live.

Meditate on the story today, and these words from Charles Wesley's hymn:

My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou my, God should die for me!

Prayer

O GOD, who didst deliver thy holy Apostle Saint Peter from his bonds and suffer him to depart unhurt: vouchsafe, we pray thee; to deliver us from the bonds of our sins, and of thy mercy preserve us from all evil. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

(Traditional Collect Prayer for the Feast of St Peter ad Vincula)