

So we're going to look at scripture together now and you will know that (or hopefully you will know) that we've been looking at the subject of Spreading the Good News during the month of June, and today we have the fourth and final part of that teaching series. In this series we've been looking at how the early church responded to some of the missional challenges (the challenges in mission in terms of outreach and sharing the gospel) – how it responded to some of those challenges that it experienced in the first few months of the church's existence. Now in previous weeks we have read how these first Christians experience the joy of seeing the Holy Spirit come upon non-Jews for the very first time (that was in Chapter 10), and then the following week we looked at how the whole church recognised that this move out of the Jewish culture into the non-Jewish culture – how the church recognised this was a movement from God (we looked at that in chapter 11). So as we now move on into 12 the events that we look at this week must have brought the believers back down to earth with a bump. Let's read Acts 12:1-19:

[Reading Acts 12:1-19]

There's an interesting story that we probably don't read that often actually, so it's nice to come to a passage that perhaps has one of two surprises for us in what happened to in the early church to Peter, but also to that fledgling church that was just beginning to really grow at this time, particularly in Jerusalem. This passage starts with King Herod Agrippa I (now he's just called King Herod, but it's not the same King Herod, for instance, that was around when Jesus was born – that was King Herod Agrippa I's grandfather: that was Herod the Great, this is his grandson King Herod Agrippa I, and he was very similar to his grandfather in so many ways).

And so, we have in the beginning of this reading King Herod Agrippa I arresting James the brother of John and having him beheaded. Now you'll remember that James and John were two of the first disciples, whom Jesus called – in Luke 5:10 we have them referred to, and it's when Peter, James and John, and a few of the other fishermen who are called by Jesus to come and be his disciples. So James and John were key members of the group of disciples, and now the apostles, as they became known once Jesus had ascended into heaven. And since Jesus' ascent into heaven, James, the brother of John, had become one of the top three leaders of the early church. So remember the church was mainly in Jerusalem, but certainly was led from Jerusalem at this time. So one of the top three leaders in the church, in the world at this stage, was arrested and we're told he was put to the sword, which means he was beheaded. His execution must have been a terrible blow to the church, and Herod, of course, found that this was so popular amongst the Jewish people; how sad that any people of faith could find joy or satisfaction in the death of another person of faith – but this is what we read here: that Herod found it was so popular that he followed up by arresting Peter who was at this time the overall leader of the church (you'll remember in Matthew 16:18 Jesus said “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” And so Peter was at this stage the overall leader of the church. King Herod intended to hold Peter, and then after the Festival of Unleavened Bread intended to try Peter publicly and then, no doubt, find him guilty and have him executed as well, to try and destroy this new movement of what we know as The Church. But Herod had reckoned without the work of the Holy Spirit. This passage illustrates various things to me about the fact that we are called to share the Good News of Jesus Prayerfully, that prayer is a key thing in the way that we are called to share the Good News.

This passage firstly illustrate for me that the Holy Spirit is the **Spirit of Mission**. It is the Spirit of

God who equips us in the mission that has been given to the church. We sometimes talk about the way the Spirit may have moved in our worship, or the way we may have sensed the Spirit in our other church activities, but we need to also recognise that he is the one who empowers our mission activity – he is the one who stirs up in us this desire to share God's love and God's compassion and God's generosity and God's justice in this world. In fact, all of these aspects of the Spirit's work, both worship, service (to the local community) and mission (missional outreach), all of those things were in evidence in the Jerusalem Church, and if we were to look at Acts 4:29-31 we see them all there: the worship of the people together (the worship of the believers together), their service to each other and to their neighbourhood, and the mission, their outreach, their sharing of God's message through Jesus Christ. All of these things were in evidence in this fledgling church in Jerusalem that was growing so rapidly. The Holy Spirit is still active in the world now, drawing people towards Christ, wooing people's hearts and bringing them to repent. And as I mentioned in my prayer that we shared a few moments ago, the word “repent” means to change our way of thinking, to change our way of thinking. And so the Holy Spirit was wooing people's hearts and bringing them to change their way of thinking and living. Just as in this passage the Holy Spirit unlocked Peter's shackles (in verse 7), and as the Holy Spirit unlock the prison gates for Peter we believe that the Holy Spirit can still unlock people's defences – their own hearts can be unlocked by the work of the Holy Spirit. Now some of us may feel called to a particular mission, we may feel that there's a particular community in our area, or a particular group of our neighbours, or at our work place, who we feel called to, and to share the good news of Jesus with. So some of us may feel called to a particular mission, but we are all called to pray for the mission of the Spirit. We are all called to pray for the mission of the Spirit, because it is the Spirit of God that enables us, and enables his church worldwide, to be living out, speaking out his message of compassion and love and renewal of human hearts and lives. However it can sometimes be hard to get church people to take mission and its challenges seriously. Well this week I read a newspaper article from 1996, so about 24 years ago, and this newspaper article was about a Reverend Earlsley White. Now he was the minister of Park United Free Church of Scotland in Uddingston (which I'm told is in south Lanarkshire in Scotland) and the Reverend White wanted to grab people's attention in his preaching. He was preaching on this particular occasion a sermon about the dangers facing missionaries, and therefore arranged to be interrupted by a man with a gun. The article stated: “The intruder, whose face was painted, held a handgun to the minister's head and told 250 cubs and Guides, [and] their parents and leaders, that religion had caused a lot of trouble in the world. [Now,] most of the adults realised that the incident had been staged when the man started to talk about missionaries being persecuted for their beliefs. But some of the younger children started to cry as [the minister] was tied up and led out of the church. The congregation then heard two shots being fired. This Sunday afternoon service, to commemorate the founding of the Scouting Movement, was stopped by the police a short time after because a member of the public reported seeing a gunman entering the church. Armed police sealed off the street outside the building and a police helicopter hovered overhead as the 69-year-old minister was interviewed. Mr White told officers from the Strathclyde Police that he was just trying to illustrate the theme of the sermon. He was later charged with obstructing the police and [his friend, the gunman, was charged] with firearms offences.” Now I think the message or the moral of this particular situation is that you can go too far in trying to hold people's attention. (I think it must have been a simpler and more innocent age because I can't imagine any church pastor thinking that that's an appropriate way to behave in our world today, but that was 24 years ago when that happened. This passage reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of mission – the Spirit of mission, the one who enables and empowers the mission of the church.

Secondly, this passage reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the **Spirit of Prayer**. We read in verse 12 that lots of the believers in Jerusalem had gathered, praying for Peter, in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (or John who is also known as Mark as it said in our reading). Now John Mark, we think he is the man who wrote Mark's Gospel. And so we have this lovely understanding here that John Mark's mother, Mary, was a leader or hosted part of the early church in the city of Jerusalem; a lovely little picture there of what the very very early church looked like and how it functioned. But the question that I had as I was reading this verse 12 here was that I wonder what the believers were praying about in relation to Peter. Were they praying (a) that Peter would have God's peace in his heart, no matter what happened to him, or were they praying (b) that Peter would be released. You know, it seems to me that their expectation in their prayers was (a) – that Peter would have God's peace in his heart whether he lived or died. But, of course, God chose to answer their prayers with (b) – he had him released. You see, it's the Spirit's role to bring our prayers into God's presence, perfected and conformed to his will. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:26-27, Paul says this: "In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God." So actually, the detail of what we pray is of less importance than the sincerity and openness with which we pray. I think that's quite an important thing, let me just say to you again: the detail of what we pray, whether we get it all right, is of less importance than the sincerity and the openness with which we pray.

And then we have described to us in this passage a quite humorous situation: the Christians are locked up inside Mary's house praying for Peter, and then Peter himself knocks at the front door. The servant girl Rhoda, who goes to the door, is so shocked to hear Peter's voice that she forgets to open the door for him and runs off to tell the prayer meeting. Now you can just imagine the people praying in the house, perhaps their response to her was "Shhhh Rhoda! Can't you see that we're praying?" And Rhoda's wanting to say "Yes, yes, but Pe..." "Shhhhh". Anyway, they tell her that she is crazy, and they don't believe her, and Peter is left outside still knocking on the door. But Rhoda here proves that it is better to be considered crazy because you know that God has answered prayer than to be regarded as sane because of your lack of belief. Eventually, they let Peter in and they hear about the Spirit brought about his supernatural release.

Thirdly, this passage reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the **Spirit of unanswered questions**. He's the Spirit of an answer questions. In this passage we have one faithful Christian leader, James, who is brutally executed whilst another is supernaturally released and goes underground, that's Peter (in verse 17). So we have the experience of James and we have the experience of Peter. Why did God rescue one and not the other? Does God in some sense love Peter more than he loves James? Not at all! Is it that not enough people were praying for James? No, it's not that either! When bad things happen to Christians not because enough people aren't praying; God is a God of compassion, and he loves us, and his concern for us is all encompassing. I don't believe James died because enough people weren't praying for him – that's a misunderstanding of the nature of God's love. Another question that comes to mind from this passage is: Why do 16 soldiers have to die (as we read in verse 19) so that one Christian Leader can live? You know, because Peter escaped, was released supernaturally; once King Herod Agrippa had investigated how it happened, and he didn't believe the fact that these soldiers have been on watch and had fulfilled their duty, he had them executed. Why should that happen, why should 16 people die in that way, 16 soldiers? Because God chose to release one Christian leader. Well, my response to this question is that like all of us King Herod had free will: he could have chosen to see God's hand

at work in Peter's escape, he could have changed his mind, he could have repented, but instead he chose to blame the guards. Even if he did hold the guards responsible, he could have chosen to change his mind and show mercy to them. But he didn't. God gives free will to every human being, even to those who wholeheartedly misuse it. In another sense, the reasons why things play out as they do is one of the great mysteries of human existence, and of our world. And we cannot understand now why these things happen. We may question why one person is healed and another is not, for instance. We may question why one person suffers a tragic loss when someone else is spared. But Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:12 that "now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we should see God face to face." Paul follows on by saying, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." Just because we have many questions that we cannot answer does not mean that we can't trust God's goodness. Yes, there are mysteries in this life, and there are mysteries how things happen, and why they happen to one person and not to another, but there is no mystery about the fact that God loves us with our love is so great and deep that we can't even get our minds around it, fully. We can trust in God's goodness. So just because we have many questions that we can't answer, doesn't mean we can't trust God's goodness; nor does it mean that we do not need to pray for God's kingdom to come, and for his will to be done on this earth, as we are told to in Matthew 6:10 when Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray. God's mission is just that: it is God's! But he wants to use, and to enter into, the prayers of those who will pray humbly and openly for what is on God's heart. And I believe God's heart is filled with an unquenchable desire to be in communion, in relationship, with us his creation because we are the apple of his eye. Praise God.

Let's pray together, shall we, before we finish.

Dear Lord Jesus we come to you on this day and we thank you that we are safe and well, and that we have been spared the outcomes that many thousands of people have suffered in these last few months, that some of us may have had the Covid-19 virus, but all of us that are connected to this church as far as we are aware have recovered, and Lord we want to thank you for your mercy. But yet we are aware that many Christian people have lost their lives during this Covid-19 pandemic. And Lord we don't believe that you loved them, or love them, any less that you love us. We're aware there are so many mysteries in this world, but Lord God we trust your character, we trust you as our loving heavenly father. And Jesus the son you are, you are the one who came to show us what human life could look like deeply and perfectly connected to the love of the Father. So Lord we pray that we will trust you, and we will have the confidence to speak out and live out, through your Spirit's energizing, your good news amongst our friends, amongst our neighbours, amongst our families, our work colleagues, whoever, that we will live out that message of compassion, and forgiveness, of renewal and hope, that Lord God we will live out that message. Amen.