

The peace that passes all understanding – Acts 12: 1 – 11



Two and a half years ago I was rushed into hospital having suffered a heart attack. I had known for some months previously that I had a heart problem, and had been rather anxiously awaiting a hospital appointment for scheduled treatment. After my emergency admission, however, a wonderful calm descended upon me, and all my fears were taken away. I thank God for granting me “the peace that passes all understanding”, which remained with me all the time I was in hospital.

Peter appears to have experienced a similar kind of peace during the events recorded in Acts 12. His situation, of course, was far worse than mine. I was in a comfortable hospital bed, in the hands of caring NHS staff, awaiting what turned out to be a very successful procedure. He was in prison, chained and guarded by soldiers, awaiting his probable execution! And yet, the night before he was due to be brought out for public trial, Peter was sleeping peacefully. What a change from the man who, just a year before, had been prepared to deny his Lord three times, in order to save his own skin.

I don't think I'm being irreverent when I say that I find a certain comic element in this account. An angel appeared in the cell in a great blaze of light, and Peter never stirred. I can imagine the angel feeling rather disgruntled that his grand entrance had had so little effect on the man he had come to rescue. He had to poke Peter to wake him, and then tell him to get up. The chains fell off Peter's wrists, and the angel led him out, past the presumably unconscious guards and into the street. It was only when the angel left him that Peter realised he had not been dreaming it all.

Charles Wesley used this incident as a vivid metaphor for his own experience of salvation in what has become one of our favourite Methodist hymns:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed thee.

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, we pray for people who are anxious and afraid at this time, for themselves or for their dear ones. We think of those who are ill, or awaiting the results of hospital tests, and those expecting to undergo surgery. Especially we pray for all who live in fear of contracting Covid-19 and those suffering from the illness now. We remember people who are uncertain about their future employment and those in our own and other countries who do not know where their next meal is coming from. We bring before you people in lands where there is armed conflict. We lift up to you those who face persecution for their faith.

*We ask you to strengthen them in their troubles and pray that they may be shown the way forward into freedom and safety. Grant them, we pray, the assurance of your loving presence, fill their hearts with hope, and surround them with your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **AMEN***

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Liberation of St. Peter, 1665-1667