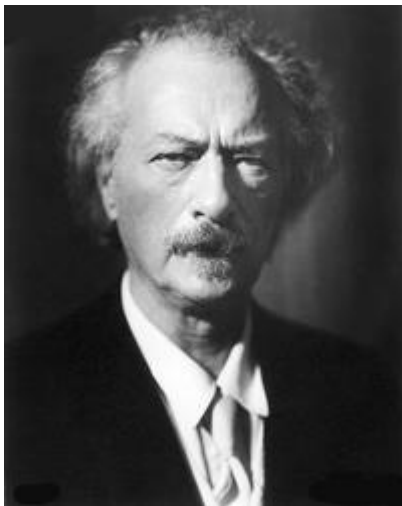


GSM 30/11/4

Today's passage: Acts 11:19 – 12:24

GOD IS IN CHARGE

I'd like to tell you a story which comes with a health warning. I first heard this story in a Tim Keller sermon but I've since checked on the internet and it's questionable, to say the least, as to whether it ever happened, so treat this as a legend or a myth if you like – it's entered folk lore but there's no evidence it actually happened. It concerns this man:



Any guesses? This is Ignacy Paderewski, who lived from 1860 to 1941. He was a composer, for a short while the Prime Minister of Poland, but best known as being the best concert pianist of his time. The story is told of a solo recital he was giving at Carnegie Hall in New York. A mother was attending with her young son, and people were waiting for Paderewski to come on and start playing. The young boy got bored and wandered off whilst his mother wasn't looking. The boy went through a door, through another door, along a corridor and found himself suddenly on stage, with thousands of people looking at him. The boy was terrified and didn't know what to do. All he saw in front of him was a piano. Impulsively he sat down at the piano and started playing Chopsticks. Maybe he was used to people encouraging him when he did that. Not a New York audience! They started booing and shouting at him to get off. Then he felt someone moving behind him and two arms either side of him. The booing and shouting died down. Paderewski himself came onto the stage

and, putting his hands either side of the boy's hands, started to play and turn the simple tune that the boy was playing into something beautiful and complex. The boy was startled but Paderewski leant in and said to the boy "Keep playing. Don't stop. Keep playing". The boy was playing, but Paderewski was in charge. He and the boy were playing together and he turned what the boy did into something many times greater than it would have been.

What we see in this morning's passage is how God is in charge. I'm not sure what you thought when you heard this morning's passage being read. Two big interventions by God in freeing Peter from prison and killing Herod, but otherwise a bunch of Christians doing stuff. Let's follow it through from verse 19 of chapter 11. Verse 19 and 20, believers spread the word about Jesus. Verse 22, the church sends Barnabas to Antioch. Verse 23, Barnabas goes and encourages the Christians there. Verse 25 and 26 Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch and they meet with people and teach them. Verses 27 and 28, someone with the gift of prophecy predicts a famine. Verses 29 and 30 the church responds and makes provision for those who will be affected. Chapter 12 verse 5 the church prays for Peter whilst he is in prison. Verse 12 to 17 the church welcomes Peter back after his escape. Verse 25 Barnabas and Saul come back from Jerusalem. And in the middle these two direct interventions by God – Peter's rescue and Herod's death.

So, a bunch of Christians doing things and God intervening in two ways. Christians doing some things, and God doing two things. Is that how we see things as happening then?

Is that how sometimes we see things happening now? We get on with our lives, living as the gospel commands or not, sometimes stumbling, sometimes treading more confidently, and we pray for God's intervention in particular situations. And now and then, like a parent taking no notice of their children's activities until one of the children comes crying to them, they step in and sort things out. Is God like that, someone who parachutes in to situations and then leaves again leaving us to crack on with we were doing until the next time?

That's not the picture painted here. What we see here is that God is in charge in everything that goes on. Let's look through the verses and the Christians doing stuff again. Verse 19 and 20, believers spread the word about Jesus. But look at verse 21 – "the Lord's hand was with them". Verse 22, the church sends Barnabas to Antioch. What does he see there? Verse 23 "evidence of the grace of God". Verse 23, Barnabas goes and encourages the

Christians there. Look at verse 24: “he was fully of the Holy Spirit”. Verses 27 and 28, someone with the gift of prophecy predicts a famine. How does Agabus, this prophet, do it? Verse 28 – One of them, named Agabus, stood and up and “through the Spirit” predicted the famine.

It’s easy to see God move when spectacular or supernatural things happen. What this passage shows is that God is directing things all the time. All the things that the church do they do with God places his hands either side of them like the pianist Paderewski and turning what they are doing into something greater than what it was. Like the boy in the story, the Christians are doing stuff, maybe stuff that didn’t seem that spectacular at the time, but like Paderewski God was in charge.

So it is for today. Whatever we do, if we follow Jesus, God is in charge.

What does it mean for us that God is in charge? I want to point out from this passage one things it doesn’t mean and three things it does mean.

GOD IS IN CHARGE *doesn’t* mean ...

we don’t have to do stuff

Here’s the one thing it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have to do stuff. All the things that we see the Christians doing in chapter 11, the Christians are *doing*. They’re not sitting back, waiting for God to intervene and miraculously turn people’s hearts towards him without them doing anything. Instead, verse 19, they are telling the good news to Jews and verse 20 they are telling the news to Gentiles. Verse 21, a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Why? Because the Lord’s hand was with them *and because they told people about Jesus*. Not because God sends an angel to spread the gospel or tells people the gospel in dreams or anything. But because Christians tell others about Jesus. The church in Jerusalem heard about this stuff in Antioch. What do they do? Well, doubtless they trusted in God to sort stuff out. But they also send Barnabas to encourage them. What next in the passage? There is to be a famine. Is God going to provide miraculously? Maybe. But what actually happens is that someone exercises their gifts of prophecy and the church puts money aside to help. The Christians do stuff. And what’s interesting in Peter’s rescue from prison

is that the angel takes Peter outside the prison but look at verse 10 – the angel leaves Peter once he's outside the prison and Peter needs to find his own way to the house where the believers are meeting.

What are the implications for us? We might ask God to intervene to help someone who needs to feed their family. How is God most likely to do this? In the same way that he did in verse 27 to 30 of chapter 11 – by people using their gifts and the church making provision. Not by food miraculously appearing in their cupboards. But by us providing them with money to buy the food or, in the case of Foodbank, buying the food for distribution. For ourselves, how do we learn from the fact that Peter had to make his own way to the believers' house? Maybe we can see that God gives us two feet to walk somewhere and doesn't provide a magic carpet. Maybe God provide us with the means to provide for ourselves and we have a responsibility to do so. God's hand may be with us, but what we see here is believers not sitting back and trusting alone in that, but doing stuff. Playing their part. How will our neighbours, friends and family hear the gospel? Chances are it will be by us telling them the gospel.

So, the fact that God is in charge doesn't mean we can sit back. But what does it mean? Three things.

GOD IS IN CHARGE means ...

God is powerful

Firstly, that God is more powerful than any other being or power. Now, what do you think of as a sign that someone has power? Maybe something ridiculously expensive as a way of showing how much power they have.



This is the Prombron Black Shark, a bespoke luxury vehicle from Latvia's Dartz Motorz Co. that in addition to armor-plating, crowd-suppression lasers and anti-paparazzi electrified door handles, offers exotic leather interiors, a Bang & Olufsen A/S sound system and, as one customer has requested, a Tiffany blue bonnet encrusted with Swarovski crystals. This is a special edition only available in China, where money talks and those with money want to show their wealth and their power.

Maybe people show their power by showing their power to defend themselves or attack others..



This is a picture from the annual Red Square parade in Moscow, where Russia each year parades its armies. During the Cold War in particular it became a way of showing off their power to America and Britain as if to say "don't mess with us".

Or maybe this is the sign of power you think of:-



Or maybe not. Who would ever see prayer as a sign of power? But this passage shows us that it is. Because what we see in this passage is how when we pray to God we call on someone who has power beyond anything in the universe.

Look at the power ranged against God's people here. Look at those guarding Peter in the jail. Verse 4 of chapter 12 – four squads of four soldiers. Sixteen soldiers to guard one man. Fighting men. People used to keeping guard. People who knew it was important that they didn't let their guard slip – look at what is going to happen to them when it turns out that Peter has escaped – verse 19 of chapter 12, they are ordered to be executed. Any Roman soldier guarding a prisoner who let that prisoner escaped became subject to the same punishment that prisoner faced. Peter was facing death, so the guards guarding him were put to death when it was discovered he had escaped. Here were sixteen fighting men, doing what they were used to doing, who knew the consequences if Peter escaped. How heavy were the odds against Peter escaping? Pretty heavy. Now look at God's power. He makes everyone stay asleep, despite the light in the cell and the fact that Peter is sleeping right next to some guards. He makes the chains slip off Peter. He makes doors open that are closed. There is no barrier that stands in the way of Peter's escape. Look at verse 8 – Peter even has time to get changed and put on his sandals. There was no chance that God's purpose could be undone by one of the guards waking up.

Look at what happens to Herod. We see in verse 2 of chapter 12 that he has the power of life and death. In verse 20 we see how he has power to give people the food they need – to decide if they will eat or starve. In verse 22 he clearly strikes an impressive figure, to the extent that people call him a god rather than a man. But God strikes him down. He goes from hero to zero. From mighty king to being eaten by worms. However powerful Herod was, God was greater.

God is great. The Roman soldiers had their weapons and their training. Herod had his kingdom. God dealt with both, simply and easily. Do we understand that when we pray? Maybe sometimes our faith falters because of the bad things we see happening around us. But here's the second thing we learn from this passage –

GOD IS IN CHARGE means...

God is not limited by our lack of faith

God's power is not limited by our lack of faith.

Look with me at chapter 12. James, one of the original apostles had just been put to death. This must have been a huge shock.

Who here remembers the TV series Spooks? What was great about Spooks is how the series revolved around various key characters in the Secret Services. Who remembers this character?



There's a good reason you don't remember her. In only the second episode of the first series, Helen Flynn, one of the key characters, that you'd been led to believe would be one of the characters the series would be built around, is murdered in a deep fat fryer. Why is this a good idea for a TV drama? Because it gave you the message – no-one is safe. With some characters like James Bond you know they're always going to dodge death. Not in Spooks. Any of the characters could die at any stage. It's the same in this morning's passage. James was one of the twelve apostles, one of them that gets the most mention in the gospels. This is a key person in the early church. Suddenly killed. That must have really shaken the early church.

Then Peter is taken. The rock on whom Jesus had said he would build his church. What do the church do? Verse 5 – they pray. But obviously not with much hope of a good outcome for Peter, because what happens when he's rescued by the angel and turns up at the house? The door is opened by Rhoda, the servant girl, who passes on the good news that Peter is there, and what do the others say? Verse 15: "You're out of your mind!". "It must be his angel". You can almost hear them. "Lord, please deliver Peter from the hands of Herod!"; Rhoda comes in saying "Peter's been delivered from the hands of Herod!"; "Don't be so stupid!". It's kind of comical. They were praying but didn't really believe Peter's rescue until they actually saw him there.

What does this show? When we pray to God, God's ability to intervene in a situation is not dependent on us having superhuman faith. God answers our prayers even when our faith is incomplete.

Finally, what do we learn about God being in charge?

GOD IS IN CHARGE means ...

we can be confident

That God's people can be confident. Knowing that God is in charge meant that the Christians could have confidence that, whatever happened, God was in charge. Look at verse 19 of chapter 11 – believers had been persecuted and scattered for their faith. Do they hide away or stop telling people about Jesus? No. They continue to proclaim God boldly to people. Where does this confidence come from if not from knowing that God is in charge? Look at Peter in prison. He is about to be brought out to trial knowing that he would be put to death. The only thing that has kept him alive, as far as Herod is concerned, is the fact that there is a religious festival going on, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when prisoners could not be executed. And now the feast is coming to an end and he is facing what he might think is his last night on earth. What is he doing in his cell? He's fast asleep. How easy do you find it to sleep if you've got a stressful thing happening the next day? Easy or hard? Peter is facing the ultimate stressful thing yet here he is, fast asleep.

If God is in charge, we know that whatever happens, good or bad, does not defeat God's purposes.



A few years back there was civil war in the central African country of Burundi, and I read an interview between a western missionary out there at the time, Simon Guillebaud, and one of his supporting churches. He mentions the confidence he has in God, confidence to take risks

in a war-torn land. Here's an extract from it – the church representative has just asked the question ...

Q: you encourage Christians not to be ruled by fear and to take risks for God. What have been the keys to being able to do that in your own life?

A: Clichéd as it sounds, even though we don't know what the future holds, we do know God holds the future. He's the safest gamble, because he's not reckless. He's supremely in control. As Jesus removed our eternal risk, he calls us to daily continual risk. Following him may not be a safe journey, but he's the Sovereign God, and can be trusted. During one particularly tense period, my colleague looked across at me as I drove around a hairpin bend ripe for an ambush and exclaimed, 'Simon, isn't it liberating? We are immortal until God calls us home!' We laughed in exhilaration. His words were so real. No rebel could touch us, unless the Sovereign Lord allowed it; and if he allowed it, then it meant he'd decided our time was up, and he wanted us home with him. I wonder if your readers will agree with that... If he's got the whole wide world in his hands, then that includes me — and his are the safest pair of hands in the world.

Now we may think, what amazing faith! But it's logical, really. If God is in charge then he knows what is to happen. In this story James dies and Peter is rescued. James was called home by God as he had accomplished the work that God had him do. Peter had not. Until he had, he was immortal. No squads of soldiers or earthly king could stand in God's way.

GOD IS IN CHARGE

God is in charge. What does that mean? It doesn't take away our responsibility to do what we are called to do. It does mean that God is stronger than any earthly power. It means that he works despite the fact that our faith is not always complete. And it means that we can have confidence despite the bad things happening around us that God is in charge. He works his purpose out. Verse 24 of chapter 12: "But the word of God continued to increase and spread".

What we do might seem weak, puny, fumbling and ineffective. But just like Paderewski put his arm round the boy at Carnegie Hall, God takes control and brings something out of it than

is greater than what we put into it. And like Paderewski in the story he says to us “*Keep playing. Don’t stop. Keep playing*”.