

Breaking Out
Bible reading: Acts 12.1-13.3

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 ... and he proceeded to arrest Peter also ... But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents.
Acts 12.1-3, 24.

Does God answer prayer? The answer in this story is Yes — but not always in the way we were expecting. The little company of believers barricaded in Mark's mother's house in Jerusalem must have wondered (12.5,12). James, one of the original fishermen disciples, had been beheaded by Herod (12.1-2), and Peter was in prison (12.3-4). Gathering behind locked doors to pray was the instinctive reaction — but it must have felt like going back to the first days of the church (Acts 1.13-14). The knock on the door must have sounded like a thunderclap. Rhoda the serving-girl (obviously a trusted member of this Christian household) was too frightened to do more than glance at the cloaked figure standing outside — and then slammed the door shut in his face. It *couldn't* be Peter — could it? But it was — and poor Rhoda was never allowed to forget the time she slammed the door on God's answer to prayer.

Meanwhile, the good news of Jesus (like the spring!) is breaking out in all sorts of unexpected places. We've watched the church in Jerusalem grow from 120 Galileans, cowering behind locked doors (Acts 1.15), to a movement of several thousands, reaching out into every level of the city (Acts 2.41-47; 4.4; 5.12-16; 6.1). We've seen it scattered, blown out by the winds of persecution, right through Judea and Samaria (ch.8), up to Antioch in the north (11.19-30), and down to Caesarea on the coast (Acts 10). And everywhere they go, the believers take the message with them, "gossiping the gospel" and planting new seedlings of the Kingdom (8.4, 11.19).

In fact, looking back, it seems a lot like the plan Jesus outlined back in chapter one (1.8) — only the apostles never quite seemed to be directing the plan, just struggling to keep up with what God was doing (even a Roman soldier seemed to be part of it!). Reminds me of the vicar who said in his first sermon to his new parish, "My job is to find out what God is doing here, and get in on the act". Not a bad motto for ministers!

And now it's time for a new phase in the story — Act Three. Ch.13 marks the beginning of a momentous journey that will lead eventually to Rome. The baton is passing imperceptibly from the original disciples to the new converts, from Peter to Saul (aka Paul), from Jerusalem to Antioch.

They do things a bit differently in the Antioch church. Quite a few of its members are 'Greeks' (11.20) — that is, Gentiles. A lot more will be Greek-speaking Jews like Barnabas, well-travelled, cosmopolitan businessmen (and women) from one of the largest cities of the Empire. They don't have apostles and elders — they have prophets and teachers instead (13.1). One of them is Saul, who has been teaching

and building up new disciples in the church in Antioch for over a year (11.21-25). They even have a new nickname —

But these new Christians hasn't forgotten their links with the old church in Jerusalem, with its ideals of compassion and mutual support. In fact, Saul and Barnabas are just back from a famine relief visit (11.29-30, 12.25). They haven't forgotten whose they are and whom they serve — their new nickname "Christianoi" just means "Christ-people," or "that Jesus lot" (11.26).

And most important, they haven't forgotten what every church needs to have at its heart — the importance of prayer. It's extraordinary what God can do when his people pray. They prayed in ch.1 — and the Spirit came. They prayed in ch.6 — and the Spirit gave courage and boldness to Stephen and Philip, one to face death, the other to preach faithfully, separated from all his friends. And here they are, praying in ch.13: *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (13.2-3).* What happens next? Just wait and see!

Our world is so different from theirs — but I can think of a few parallels (you may be able to think of more). **Breaking out** of lockdown — in a slow and cautious kind of way, that will still require faithfulness and courage (and **persevering in prayer**) on our part. **Famine relief:** please don't forget it's **Christian Aid Week!** We can't do an envelope collection this year, but we really need to reach out in compassion to our brothers and sisters struggling with the pandemic around the world. You can give directly on the Christian Aid website: just click on <https://www.christianaid.org.uk>

And finally —STOP PRESS announcement — **passing on the baton!** The Diocese of Chester has just announced the name of the new Bishop of Chester — Rt Revd Mark Tanner, currently Bishop of Berwick in Newcastle Diocese (but he was ordained in Chester and knows the diocese well). Please pray for Mark and his wife — and watch the video on <https://www.chester.anglican.org>

God bless, Loveday.