

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. Acts 12.5.

We have seen how there was clearly a vicious gene in the Herod family. Herod the Great wanted to kill the Baby Jesus. His son, Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded, and now his *grandson*, King Herod Agrippa II had the apostle James, the brother of John, executed, but the *prize* was to have captured the chief apostle himself, Peter. No way was Peter to escape. We read in Acts 12.4 on p1106 that there were four squads of four guards for Peter. V6 tells us that at night Peter was chained to two soldiers on each side ...

Meantime all the church's energies were channelled into praying for Peter. Here we see an interesting contrast of powers. On the one hand there is the massive power of the state, of soldiers, swords, chains and prisons. That is a very ugly power. It comes from hatred, might, oppression. On the *other* hand we see the simple power of prayer, and *that* power derives from love and caring. Could you turn to p1164, to 2 *Corinthians* 10.3ff, a passage we have looked at before? Vv3-6... V4, we do not use the world's weapons of force, might, hatred; we use the power of prayer, the power of God's love which can demolish those strongholds of resistance to God's rule. The Church has rarely learned this lesson. In past centuries when bishops were princes, Christians used worldly power to coerce, imprison. Now, thankfully, we have lost that power and influence. Now people in the west laugh at the church. Good, I say! Let's get back to the power of prayer and God's Word. We don't need swords, money, chains. When Jesus faced the worldly ruler Pontius Pilate, who was the one with the real power?

Peter is held by the force of chains, soldiers, and swords but his fellow believers use the force of prayer. Let's read on to see what happened. V7, that night an angel came to Peter in prison, and violently *punched* him in the ribs to wake him up and tell him to get up. The chains fell off and, following the angel, he walked through the iron gates which opened, v10, 'by itself'. (I wonder if you know what the Greek word is for 'by itself'. It's *αυτοματη*, from which we get 'automatic'). Anyway, it's not long before Peter found himself on the street, free at last, vv10-11...

You might think I'm being a bit sentimental when I say the power of prayer is stronger than worldly power. It certainly was in this account of Peter's miraculous escape from his heavy guard. In a recent newsletter I asked how much was really achieved after all the millions of pounds and tons of ammunition wasted in the First World War. In this present Iraq war it has taken 250,000 rounds of ammunition to kill each insurgent. Swords are not *that* powerful!

I would like you to notice the little word 'but' in v5: 'so Peter was kept in prison, *but* the church was earnestly praying to God for him'. *But!* It's a great word, a very *powerful* word, which brings us hope as we begin this New Year.

We all have hopes and plans as we stand at the beginning of this New Year. Some plans are pretty silly and unrealistic. I was amused on New Year's Eve to listen to the BBC play the economic forecasts for 2008. Every one of these economic experts from the Treasury, the Bank of England, the great finance houses, forecast growth. One 'expert' forecast growth

in 2008 of 2%. The expert came from Lehman Brothers which doesn't even exist now! I do wonder at these economists. The Queen famously asked last year, 'If the financial crisis was so huge, why did no-one notice it coming?' A great lady!

In January 2008, everyone thought the party of excess would go on for ever; it was all onwards and upwards. Well, as we now see, God had other plans. 2008 saw God's great 'but'.

When the Berlin Wall came down, and communist Russia collapsed, everyone here in the West thought that western liberalism had finally won. The distinguished historian Francis Fukuyama even wrote a notorious book with the triumphant title, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Far from living in a settled liberal global peace, today we are surrounded by Islamic terrorist uncertainty and fear.

We make our plans, but God has his 'but'. Since the Second World War, particularly since the disastrous 1960s, we in Europe planned to live without God. We're all secular now. We don't need that oppressive rubbish. Well, just look around you to see the devastation caused by chucking out the moral compass, and it will get worse. God has said his 'but'. I'm glad that he says 'but' to our plans, because we human beings have an awful tendency to muck things up. God's ways are a lot better than man's ways, especially the ways of men (and women) who are out to make a name for themselves or get your vote!

Many people will face this year with very few plans. Their dreams have been crushed, and they dare not hope for anything in the future. I want to thank you all for all the help and comfort you have brought to Laura and me these past

days. Like so many people, Laura and I had our plans for the future. We had our dreams, but things did not turn out the way we expected. God very decisively and finally put his 'but' on our plans. That is very hard, but we have to believe that God's 'but' points us to a *better* way; that his plan for the future is far, far, better than what we planned. The most difficult challenge in life, I believe - in fact, the whole *point* of life - is to know God, to know his will, and to get *into* it. I begin each day asking for God to help me to get into his plan, and to live in his time.

The greatest 'but' of all time was at Easter. The world hated Jesus because he challenged their authority. They refused to accept him as Lord, because *they* wanted to be Lord. So they killed him on a Cross on Good Friday. That would settle *that* problem, they thought. Killing him would get Jesus out of their way. Easter was God's 'but'. He had other plans. He raised him from the dead, and he's *still* challenging people about this lordship thing, this matter of ultimate *control*. And that's why Herod Agrippa persecuted Christians, and why people today are *still* persecuting and rubbishing Christians.

We can plan whatever we want, but God is in final control. Jesus is Lord. We can spend all our time *resisting* God's 'but' but we are wasting our time. He will have his way among us. We can become embittered that things don't turn out the way we expected, or we can trust him. His 'but' is good. So, begin this New Year with words of *Proverbs* 3.5-6:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.