

## Family Worship – Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020

(If you have internet access, you'll find a video that includes most of the material provided for this week on our Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/muckamorepc](http://www.facebook.com/muckamorepc) If you don't have access to Facebook, here's some of the contents for you to read)

Hello everyone and thanks for joining us for another week of Family Worship in our homes. Our first song is called "His mercy is more" - it's a song that talks about the fact that while our sins are many, God's mercy is more. The first verse says: *"What love could remember no wrongs we have done? Omniscient, all-knowing, He counts not their sum. Thrown into a sea, without bottom or shore - our sins they are many, His mercy is more"*. The song can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1GiZL60c80>  
*If you don't have access to Facebook, please play a suitable track from one of your CDs.*

Please pray together giving thanks to God for the fact that while our sins are many, his mercy is more. Thank him for his love, patience and the riches of his kindness shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, and for the way he tenderly calls us to come home to him so that we may enjoy the kind of life that only Jesus can provide for us as we put our trust in him.

The Bible passage we'll be looking at together is Acts 12:1-19. Please read it for yourselves - if there's more than one of you, perhaps you could take it in turn to read...

*If you don't have internet access, here's Peter's sermon for you to read:*

### Acts 12:1-19 "Stairway to Heaven"

It might well be boring – standing there 'on guard', as it were, at the shop door, keeping people out until it's 'safe' for them to go in, armed with hand sanitiser to spray on customers' hands and wipes for them to clean the handles of their trolley as they enter the shop at your say-so – boring, maybe, and yet it's probably one of the most important roles that any member of staff could be doing in these days of Covid-19. Of course, we're more used to thinking about guards keeping people *in* than keeping people out – especially in places like prisons. Sometimes we'll hear of someone being wrongly released and when that happens there's a whole media who-ha and an inquiry's launched into how it happened - and heads can roll! Back in Peter's day, we're told in Acts 12:6 *"The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance"* - four guards to make sure this one man stood trial before the King the next day. What for? Because Herod had decided it would benefit his standing with the Jewish leaders no end if he was to move against these so-called 'Christians' – as followers of Jesus had now become known. For no apparent reason other than he could, Herod had executed James, one of the first people to be called by Jesus as a disciple. Mind you, he didn't need any particular reason to be cruel; it was in his genes – ask any historian and they'll tell you that the name 'Herod' is synonymous with cruelty and brutality of the highest order. And they'll also tell you that Herods were great at playing politics; they knew how to curry favour from whoever could boost their position and status – sometimes the Roman authorities who'd appointed them in the first place, and sometimes the Jews who were equally good at using them for their own ends when it suited. The Herod of Acts 12, Herod Agrippa I, was no different to any of his namesakes, as v.19 proves: *"After Herod had a thorough search made for Peter and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while"* Acts 12:19. Herod didn't take at all kindly to Peter's latest disappearing act and four soldiers paid the ultimate price for losing a prisoner under their watch – that was the reality of working for someone like Herod. But did you notice

something else about him? After he'd meted out his cruel punishment, he cleared off to Caesarea – the town on the Mediterranean coast where Cornelius the centurion lived. I wonder why? Was he spooked by what had happened in the prison? Did the events of Peter's escape feed his crushing sense of insecurity? Was he worried that the guards had actually been telling the truth about what'd happened and that God could now come after him for what he'd done to James? If he was, he was about to be reminded that leaving the scene of the crime doesn't prevent God from taking action against the guilty party. Turns out heading to Caesarea wasn't maybe the best of ideas. True, he came off the better in the dispute he'd been having with his neighbours in Tyre and Sidon. Finding themselves dependent on imports of food from Herod's territory, they did what politicians do in such circumstances – they cut a deal with some of Herod's staff, before going on to do something else politicians do in such circumstances – talk the other person up; make them out to be the best thing since sliced bread; a statesman-like figure who showed great wisdom & ability in dealing with political issues. *"This is the voice of a god, not a man!"* they shouted! Herod knew this was an accolade no good Jew could ever entertain but, then, he of all people could hardly be described as a good Jew, could he? And so, instead of deflecting the accolade, he accepted it with pride; and he paid a heavy price for it – *"That was the last straw"* as The Msg translates Acts 12:23. *"God had had enough of Herod's arrogance and sent an angel to strike him down. Herod had given God no credit for anything. Down he went. Rotten to the core, a maggoty old man if there ever was one, he died"*. God has a way of dealing with people who usurp his position; who grab power for themselves; who take authority that is not theirs to take.

But what of Peter in all of this? It wasn't the first time Peter'd found himself in prison, as we saw a few weeks ago. In fact, it was the third. In Acts 4 & 5, he & John had been imprisoned by the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling Council – the same body of people who'd tried Jesus and called for his crucifixion. On that occasion they'd been released with a caution and, afterwards, had joined with their fellow believers in a time of prayer.

His second experience of prison was again at the hands of the Sanhedrin but this time his freedom wasn't so much of a release as an escape: *"during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors and brought them out"* Acts 5:19. His third visit to prison was a very different affair. It wasn't the Jewish Council he was dealing with but Herod and, as we've already said, Herod didn't mess about – four groups of four guards to keep this one man secure. Why the heavy security? Herod would've known about the previous escape story – it was his business to know about such things – and no one was going to make a fool of Herod! At least, that's what Herod thought! But there were two things he hadn't reckoned on – one, that no one makes a fool of God, as Herod found out for himself, as we've just been hearing; and, two, the church was praying. Isn't that the only power that the powerless possess in situations like this? When things are beyond our control; when we're unable to remedy the situation in which we find ourselves; when there's nothing we, personally, can do to rectify the circumstances we face – where can we go but to the Lord? On *this* occasion – it doesn't *always* happen this way – but, on this occasion, God's response to the prayers of his people saw a miraculous event take place. An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and set him free. Peter, himself, wasn't sure if it was fact or fantasy, reality or dream – he'd been sleeping, surprise, surprise, when it all started to happen! But when reality hit home and he found himself alone in the cold night air a street away from the prison, he said to himself: *"Without a shadow of a doubt, the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jews were anticipating"*. It suddenly dawned on him what had just taken place - the Lord had intervened on his behalf in a deeply personal way. God was nearer to him than even Peter realised. He'd been right there in that prison with him through the angel who led him out. His reaction reminds me of one of my favourite Bible stories, ever! You'll find it in Gen 28:10-22 and it involves

Jacob. Jacob the rascal; Jacob the deceiver – but he was about to discover the reality of God’s presence in a way he never had before, *so much so* that it became a life-changing experience for him. As with Peter, Jacob found himself in the dark of night - and asleep. He had a dream – a stairway reached from heaven to earth at the exact spot where Jacob lay asleep. On the stairway he saw angels moving up and down, up and down. The Lord stood at the top and spoke to Jacob – Jacob had never heard God like that before. For all of his life to that point, he’d lived on borrowed faith - the faith of his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham. He’d never had a personal experience with the God they worshipped and followed. Everything to do with God had been second-hand to him; handed down to him, never his but theirs. But that all changed in these moments – and Jacob was a changed man, too. For a long, long time, the image of angels moving up and down this stairway was lost on me – I didn’t think it had any particular significance. I had this picture of shopping centres with people passing each other on escalators going up and down side by side. The angels stepping off at the bottom and going back up again only to do the same at the top and come down again – round and round in circles. I’d always focused on the Lord at the top speaking to Jacob – the angels were just a side-show that added to the mystery and the spectacle of the dream! But now, I believe, it’s more than that; way more than that. On so many occasions in the Bible, angels are sent by God to do special things in people’s lives that enable them to recognise the presence and power of the Lord at work in them, for them, with them and through them. And so, these angels aren’t simply moving up and down aimlessly. They’re being sent out and returning to God, continuously – a constant connection between heaven and earth; between the Lord and his people. Up until then, Jacob had the same picture of God that so many people have – a God in heaven who set the world in motion and then turned his attention to other things. He’s not interested or concerned about individuals, in general, and me in particular. He’s got bigger fish to fry! God neither has the time nor the inclination to worry about little old me! Maybe one or both of my parents were Christians and brought me up to know about God but it was all a bit second-hand to me. Maybe my parents told me God loves me; yes, *the Bible* tells me God loves me; but it’s big bad world out there and I’m a nobody; one individual in a huge sea of people – billions of them! It’s every man for himself. Nobody’s going to take care of me except myself. And so that’s what we do. We get on with life our own way because we think God doesn’t notice or doesn’t care or is too busy, and so we take things into our own hands and live however we like; the way that seems best to us. That’s how Jacob saw things – but Jacob was wrong to think like that – and so are we. Here in this dream, God makes himself real to Jacob; God shows himself in a personal way – *“I am nearer to you than you think; and I am constantly, every moment of every day in every situation and circumstance working for your good and my glory”*. Jacob awakens with a start – reality suddenly dawns on him *“Surely the Lord is here and I wasn’t aware of it”* he says. *“How awesome is this place!”* The same thing happens with Peter – God shows himself in a personal way - *“I am nearer to you than you think; and I am constantly, every moment of every day in every situation and circumstance working for your good and my glory”*. Reality suddenly dawns on Peter - *“Now I know without a doubt”* says Peter, *“the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jews were anticipating”*. Now I know – can you say that? Or is it all a bit second-hand to you? Perhaps, reality is beginning to dawn on you - that God is nearer to you than you think? That God is constantly wanting, in every moment of every day in every situation and circumstance, to work for your good and his glory? When things are beyond our control; when we’re unable to remedy the situation in which we find ourselves; when there’s nothing we, personally, can do to rectify the circumstances we face – the Lord is nearer to us than we think. When we feel the guilt and shame of things we’ve done in the past; when we feel worthless, helpless and alone; when we can’t see the stairway or hear the voice, the Lord is nearer to us than we realise – in Jesus. *“I tell you the truth”* Jesus says in Jn 1:51, *“you will see heaven open and the angels of God going up and*

*down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth". Surely the Lord is in this place, I was not aware of it? This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth; between the Lord and his people. So, as the song says, "turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace". Jesus is the connection we need between ourselves and God; and the connection becomes real and personal when we trust in what he has done on the cross to make us right with God and to bring us life. When we welcome him into our lives, it's like we carry his life in our veins – his life becomes the heartbeat that sends life through the whole of our being so that we find our life in him; real life, true life, eternal life.*

Now watch/listen/sing along with this song – it's a new take on an old favourite – "Turn your eyes upon Jesus". The additional verses invite us to turn our eyes to the hillside where he died; to the morning of his resurrection; and to the heavens for his return. It finishes: "We adore You, behold You, our Saviour ever true; Oh Jesus, we turn our eyes to You". You can find the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2tKVqZZil4>  
*If you don't have internet access, please play a suitable track from one of your CDs.*

Please pray for others as you finish:

1. for families in our fellowship who have been bereaved during the past week and folks who have been in hospital for surgery or treatment in recent days;
2. for the Elders as they discuss and decide about the possible reopening of the church for Sunday worship in keeping with the government and PCI's guidelines and work through the checklist that needs to be completed;
3. for our friends in Croatia as they continue to renovate their new church building - the Team from MPC would've been heading to Koprivnica on Tuesday of this week to help with this work;
4. that the lifting of lockdown restrictions will not bring about a surge in numbers of new cases of Covid-19 and that people who have been shielding will not feel anxious about returning to work or being able to leave their homes.

Thanks for following this outline for Family Worship – may you know God's presence and sustaining grace with you in the week ahead.