

Set Apart for Me

Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 12 and 13

What We Found

We held the hard mystery first: James executed, Peter delivered, both apostles, both faithful; the Church's earnest prayer for Peter is on record (12:5), and her grief for James needs none. God's faithfulness is not a safety guarantee; He knows when to crown a servant with martyrdom and when to send the angel, and the Church lives on both.

Then the discovery: Luke tells Peter's rescue as a personal Exodus, set in the Passover season. The angel comes by night, light shines in the cell, the chains fall, and the angel's commands echo Israel's Passover posture, girded and sandaled for departure in haste (Exodus 12:11), down to Peter's wrapped mantle, past the guards and through the iron gate, until Peter names it himself: "the Lord rescued me from the hand of Herod," as Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. Meanwhile the church prayed earnestly and then refused to believe its own answered prayer, leaving Peter knocking while they debated; God answers the praying Church she actually is, doubts and all. And the same angel of the Lord who woke the humble man into freedom struck down the king who accepted worship, while Luke posted his serene scoreboard: "But the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24).

Then the pivot of the book: at Antioch, while the church was worshiping the Lord and fasting, Luke's word is leitourgountōn, the root of our word liturgy, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul," and the mission was conferred with fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands (13:2-3). The greatest missionary movement in history was born in the liturgy, not a planning meeting. Paul's first sermon preached Christ from Israel's own psalter, the same Psalm 16 Peter used at Pentecost, offering justification that the law of Moses could never give (13:38-39), and when opposition came, the missionaries claimed Isaiah's commission, a light for the Gentiles to the uttermost parts of the earth, and left town "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13:52).

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles (4th century)

Chrysostom sets chapter 12 as a contest of weapons: Herod has soldiers, chains, and an execution date; the Church has earnest prayer. And the prayer proved stronger than the iron. The Church's power has never been in her numbers or her friends at court, but in her knees.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Leo the Great, Sermons on the Apostles Peter and Paul (5th century)

St. Leo preached that the chains of Peter were more precious to the Church than any triumph, for in them the weakness of man and the power of Christ were displayed together: the Lord knows both when to crown His servants with martyrdom, as James, and when to send His angel, as Peter.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (8th century)

St. Bede reads Peter's rescue through Passover eyes: as Israel, girded and sandaled, was led out of Egypt by night, so Peter was led out of prison at the season of Unleavened Bread. In the first apostle's deliverance every Christian may read his own: roused by grace, loosed from chains he could not break.

Live It This Week

Two assignments, one vertical and one horizontal. First, put a decision on the altar: choose the most consequential open question in your life and carry it deliberately into the liturgy, one Mass or holy hour this week attended specifically to lay it before the Lord, with a small fast beforehand if health permits. Do not demand an answer; practice the listening. Second, build a Mary's house: choose one person or intention that needs earnest intercession and pray for it daily until next session. Expect to be as surprised as Rhoda.

Memory Verse

"I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth."
(Acts 13:47)

Before Next Session

Read Acts 14 and 15, once.

Catechism References

CCC 849-850 (the Church is missionary by nature) · CCC 1070 (liturgy, the work of God) · CCC 2636 (the intercession of the first communities)