



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 9 May 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to touch upon the last episode in the life of St Peter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, his imprisonment by order of Herod Agrippa, and his release through the marvelous intervention of the Angel of the Lord on the eve of his trial in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 12:1-17).

The narrative is once again marked by the prayer of the Church. St Luke writes: “So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5). And, after having miraculously left the prison, on the occasion of his visit to Mary’s house, the mother of John also called Mark, it tells us “many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12).

Between these two important observations that illustrate the attitude of the Christian community in the face of danger and persecution, is recounted the detainment and release of Peter, during the entire night. The strength of the unceasing prayer of the Church rises to God and the Lord listens and performs an unheard of and unexpected deliverance, sending his Angel.

The account reminds us of the great elements during Israel’s deliverance from captivity in Egypt, the Hebrew Passover. As happened in that major event, here also, the Angel of the Lord performs the primary action that frees Peter. And the actions of the Apostle — who is asked to rise quickly, put on his belt and gird his loins — repeating those of the Chosen People on the night of their deliverance through God’s intervention, when they were invited to eat the lamb quickly with their belts fastened, sandals on their feet, and their staffs in their hands, ready to leave the country (cf.

Ex 12:11). Thus, Peter could exclaim: “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his Angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod” (Acts 12:11). The Angel does not only recall the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, but also the Resurrection of Christ. Recounted in the Acts of the Apostles: “and behold, an Angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him” (Acts 12:7). The light that fills the prison cell, the same action to awaken the Apostle, refers to the liberating light of the Passover of the Lord that triumphs over the darkness of night and evil. Finally, the invitation to “Wrap your mantle around you and follow me” (Acts 12:8) echoes the words of the initial call of Jesus in our hearts (cf. Mk 1:17), repeated after the Resurrection on Lake Tiberias, where on two occasions the Lord says to Peter, “Follow me” (Jn 21:19,22). It is a pressing call to follow him. Only by coming out of ourselves to walk with the Lord and by doing his will can we live in true freedom.

I would also like to highlight another aspect of Peter’s attitude in prison. In fact, we note that while the Christian community is praying earnestly from him, Peter “was sleeping” (Acts 12:6). In a critical situation of serious danger, it is an attitude that might seem strange, but instead denotes tranquility and faith. He trusts God. He knows he is surrounded by the solidarity and prayers of his own people and completely abandons himself into the hands of the Lord. So it must be with our prayer, assiduous, in solidarity with others, fully trusting that God knows us in our depths and takes care of us to the point that Jesus says “even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore” (Mt 10:30-31). Peter lives through that night of imprisonment and release from prison as a moment of his discipleship with the Lord who overcomes the darkness of night and frees him from the chains of slavery and the threat of death. His is a miraculous release, marked by various accurately described steps, guided by the Angel, despite the monitoring of the guards, through the first and second guard posts, up to the iron doors to exit to the city, with the door opening by itself in front of them (cf. Acts 12:10). Peter and the Angel of the Lord make their way together down a stretch of the street until, coming back to himself, the Apostle realizes that the Lord really freed him and, after having reflected on the matter, went to the house of Mary the mother of Mark where many disciples were gathered in prayer. Once again the community’s response to difficulty and danger is to trust in God, strengthening the relationship with Him.

Here it seems useful to recall another difficult situation that the early Christian community experienced. St James speaks of it in his Letter. It is a community in crisis, in difficulty, not so much because of persecution, but because of the jealousies and contentions within it (cf. Jas 3:14-16). The Apostle wonders about the reason for this situation. He finds two primary motives. The first is that they let themselves be carried away by their emotions, by the dictates of their own interests, by selfishness (cf. Jas 4:1-2a). The second is the lack of prayer — “you do not ask” (Jas 4:2b) — or a kind of a prayer that cannot qualify as such — “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (Jas 4:3). This situation would change, according to St James, if the community all spoke together with God, truly praying assiduously and unanimously. In fact, even talking about God runs the risk of losing inner strength and the testimony dries up if they are not animated, sustained and accompanied by prayer, by continuity of

a living dialogue with the Lord. An important reminder also for us and our communities, both the small ones like the family and the bigger ones like the parish, the diocese and the entire Church. And it makes me think that they prayed in this community of St James, but prayed wrongly, solely for their own passions. We must always learn again how to pray properly, truly pray, moving towards God and not towards our own good.

Instead, the community that is concerned about Peter's imprisonment is a community that truly prays the entire night, deeply united. And it is overwhelming joy that fills the hearts of all when the Apostle unexpectedly knocks at the door. It is joy and amazement in light of the actions of the God who listens. Thus, from the Church arises the prayer for Peter and to the Church he returns to tell "how the Lord had brought him out of the prison" (Acts 12:17). In that Church where he is set as a rock (cf. Mt 16:18), Peter recounts his "Passover" of liberation. He experiences true freedom in following Jesus. He is enveloped in the radiant light of the Resurrection and can therefore testify to the point of martyrdom that the Lord is Risen and "sent his Angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod" (Acts 12:11). The martyrdom he was to suffer in Rome will definitively unite him with Christ, who had told him: when you are old, another will take you where you do not want to go, to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God (cf. Jn 21:18-19).

Dear brothers and sisters, the episode of the liberation of Peter as told by Luke tells us that the Church, each of us, goes through the night of trial. But it is unceasing vigilance in prayer that sustains us. I too, from the first moment of my election as the Successor of St Peter, have always felt supported by your prayer, by the prayers of the Church, especially in moments of great difficulty. My heartfelt thanks. With constant and faithful prayer the Lord releases us from the chains, guides us through every night of imprisonment that can gnaw at our hearts. He gives us the peace of heart to face the difficulties of life, persecution, opposition and even rejection. Peter's experience shows us the power of prayer. And the Apostle, though in chains, feels calm in the certainty of never being alone. The community is praying for him. The Lord is near him. He indeed knows that Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Constant and unanimous prayer is also a precious tool to overcome any trial that may arise on life's journey, because it is being deeply united to God that allows us also to be united to others. Thank you.