

"The Hidden Hand of God!"- Acts 12:19b-24. CCH Sermon SMPS 24th June 2021

12:1

- It often feels like Christianity is losing doesn't it?
- I have here last month's copy of Evangelicals Now newspaper, and on just one double page we have stories from all over the world of Christians getting pummelled...
 - **Uganda**- Christian mother of 7 stabbed by her Muslim relatives.
 - **India**- 7 Covid deaths in my church in 7 days.
 - **France**- Evangelicals face tough curbs
 - **Finland**- Lutheran pastor in court for his views on sexual morality
 - **Nigeria**- Baptist service attacked killing 1 Christian, wounding 1 and abducting 5.
- It often feels like Christianity is losing.
- And here in the **UK** it's not as if we are seeing great growth.
 - The church is in decline, shrinking by 1/5 over the last 20 years
 - with some churches teetering on the edge of viability after the lockdown.
 - Most of the population just seems apathetic towards Christianity,
 - and as restrictions lift they seem more interested in social life and football rather than church.
- It often feels like Christianity is losing.
 - Maybe you **yourself** sometimes wonder if it's worth being a Christian at all.
- And that is why we so need the book of Acts.
- Because it reveals to us the hidden hand of God
 - It shows us ultimate realities- what's really going on in God's world.
 - It shows us that God is alive and well and at work in the world.
- This morning in our final passage of Acts, I invite you to see God's hidden hand at work in two areas.
 - 1) OPPOSING THE ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL
 - 2) ADVANCING THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL

1) SEE THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD- OPPOSING THE ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL (V19-23)

- For those who weren't here last week the chapter began with the news
 - that of Jesus' closest 3 disciples, one (James) had been brutally put to death,
 - and another (Peter) looked to be next.
 - Horrifying. And it's all thanks to King Herod.
- You need to know that he was basically a thug from a family of thugs.
 - His **granddad** Herod the Great was the one that wanted all the babies in Bethlehem killed.
 - His **uncle**, Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and helped get Jesus crucified.
 - And this **Herod**, Herod Agrippa, is bumping off Christians to stay in the majority's good books. So quite a nasty piece of work.
- But there's a bigger picture beyond the dangers of this messy and dangerous world.
 - There's a God in heaven who sits on his throne.
 - He is working out his purposes in history.
 - And yes, James' work is done and he's called home,
 - But He will need Peter a bit longer later on in ch 15 at the council of Jerusalem, so he's set free from prison as we saw last week.
 - And God isn't going to let his servant and his message be stopped
 - Not by a puny puppet King
 - Not by 16 soldiers
 - the iron bars of a prison
 - And v18-19 ended with Herod furiously executing the soldiers for letting Peter get away.
- But what happens to Herod? Does he get any comeuppance?
- What happens to any persecutor of Christians, who doesn't turn from their ways?

V19.

- Herod is fuming. He's lost face with the Jews for failing to stop Peter and he goes off in a huff back to his palace on the coast at Caesarea, built by Granddad in honour of Julius C.
- And whether or not the Jewish squabble has spun him into a new quarrel with Tyre and Sidon (these are slightly further north up the coast in Lebanon), or more likely it's an old argument that has reignited, the neighbours want a chat.

v20a

- You get a picture of Herod that he's a bit of a megalomaniac, concerned only with his ego, his power and his reputation.
- Indeed, if you look him up on Wikipedia, you see that he's got quite a murky past, and one of his buddies growing up was none other than Claudius- who by this stage is Roman emperor. So perhaps he's only got himself into high places because of who he knows.
- You certainly didn't want to cross Herod, and it looks like he's in a bit of a rage and blocking trade routes to Tyre and Sidon. This is going to take some careful diplomacy.

2nd half of v20

- It doesn't look totally honest. I wonder if there's some wheeler dealing going on here.
- The people from Tyre and Sidon desperately need a way of smoothing out the King, so they manage to find someone very close and give them a backhander.
- Now Blastus is here called a trusted personal servant.
- I can imagine him like in one of those Downton Abbey scenes, servant ironing his master's trousers, and having a little heart to heart.
- "Boss, you really don't want to go upsetting the neighbours. Those people in Tyre and Sidon, I know they are a bit of a pain but I'm sure you can find a place in your heart for peace towards them can't you, I mean they've got to eat?"
- Herod replies coldly, "Well we'll see at our meeting tomorrow".

v21.

- Now we've actually got a bit more information about this from outside the Bible from the Jewish historian Josephus. I can give you a link if you want to read it for yourself.
- Apparently wanting to dazzle his audience at a special festival in honour of Caesar, Herod was wearing a super shiny silver cape in front of loads of dignitaries from across the area.
- And the crowds are chanting.
- Think of the football crowds from the Euros chanting (but without the social distancing and the goals). You can just feel the hype.
- And both Luke and Josephus record that the crowds are flattering him with elevated language.

v22.

- And what does Herod do?
- Do you remember what Peter did in a similar situation a couple of chapters ago when Cornelius was on his face about to worship him?
- "Stand up, I'm only a man myself"
- But Herod rather likes it.

Do you know it's enough to be a man or a woman.

- To be human is to be made in the image of God, it's to carry God's very likeness. Humanity has a dignity and a power that is in a small way, God-like.
- But trouble comes when we move from being in the likeness of God to being like a God
- Herod should have pushed the praise away.
- It's quite flattering to be put on a pedestal.
- Most leaders, pop stars, tech giants, pastors and politicians don't mind it at all.
- But God does.
- It's a horribly arrogant thing to climb into God's throne.

- ▲ Wimbledon starts tomorrow after 2 years.
- Imagine a person climbing into umpire's chair. Outrageous. Security wouldn't let it.
- And God doesn't allow it too.

v23

- Reminds me of the Passover angel of death
- The theologian medics have had a field day looking at this account and Josephus' account and speculating on exactly what the medical diagnosis was.
 - arsenic poisoning
 - peritonitis
 - the rupture of a cyst
 - intestinal blockage caused by a ball of worms (if v23 is literal- it can be used as a metaphor for just saying he died a nasty death).
- Either way, Herod died very suddenly and very horribly.
- Friends do you see that history is HIS Story, and behind the affairs of rulers and nations, God is at work.
- We can't see him. But we can sometimes see his hidden hand at work.
- And some of the time we are stuck in v2 with Christians being killed
- And at other times we see wonderful releases in answer to prayer.
- Sometimes rulers get away with it for a while, acting like they are God.
- But eventually God's hidden hand catches up with them in this life or the next.
- There's a lot of irony in this chapter. Herod thinks he's so powerful, but he's powerless.
 - This glorious king who holds the power of life and death over prisoners and prison guards is powerless to save his own life.
 - The angry ruler controls whether whole nations get their food, can't even stop his own body from becoming food for worms.

- And the one who delights to bring the appointed judgement day to apostles and neighbouring cities faces his own judgement day.
- We've got to reckon on the hidden hand of God.
- You can't see God but you will one day.
- And there will be a payback.
- Woe betide those who have opposed King Jesus and his people.
- He is the true ruler on the throne. He may look like a crucified corpse. But he's the Living Lord who will return to judge the living and the dead.
- If you recognise elements of Herod's attitude in yourself (particularly if at work you have power over others) stop acting like a God.
- Start living like God is in control and you are not.
- As we saw in the verse with which we started the service "God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble". Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

See the hidden hand of God opposing the enemies of the gospel

- This is good news for Christians in parts of the world today crushed by oppressive regimes. The time will come. The tables will turn. Woe betide the Herods and Hitlers and Hussein and so called Eternal leaders of North Korea. They will meet their maker.
- Even if only in a small way, you are treated as a bit of an eccentric embarrassment in the office for being known as a Christian. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is lord.
- But it's bad news if we are resisting King Jesus.
- Come to him, humble yourself under him, and live on the winning not the losing side.

- I love that quote (it's refers to events just a few decades later than this episode). "Nero beheaded Paul. Today people call their dogs Nero and their sons Paul".

See the hidden hand of God opposing the enemies of the gospel

2) SEE THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD ADVANCING THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL (v24).

- Just one verse. But it's hugely important. **v24**
- It's a wonderful contrast.
- You want to see a diamond clearly in all its brilliance? The guy in the shop will put it on a dark black cloth.
- And the beauty of v24 shines so brightly when we see it in contrast to what's come before.
 - Herod is going nowhere, the Word is spreading.
 - Herod is rotting, the Word of God is flourishing like a beautiful flower
- It's at least the third of some little progress reports in the book.
- If you have a bible flick back to
 - 6:7
 - 9:31
- Progress. It's the story of Acts.
 - The word of God spreading unstoppably like ripples across a pond.
 - And it may feel like Christianity is dying in Huntingdon.
 - But it's not.
 - The seismic events of the death and resurrection of King Jesus continue to ripple out across the world today.
 - You here today are part of that.
- And so I'd like to end our sermon and our series with an invitation.
- It's an invitation to come on board the good ship mission
 - She stands ready to set sail into the next week
 - She's not a cruise liner but a battleship.

- People in Huntingdon have been rattled by Covid.
 - They have seen how vulnerable life is.
 - Their work, their livelihoods, their health brought to brought to a standstill by a tiny virus.
 - And we have something bigger and better have the words of eternal life.
- This boat is marked Unstoppable on one side.
- And Unexpected on the other.
 - **Unexpected** because as we've seen in this series, it goes to the most unlikely of people.
 - The Samaritans, hated by Jews flock to Jesus.
 - An Ethiopian eunuch on his chariot, turns to Jesus.
 - A Roman Centurion named Cornelius makes Jesus his Lord.
- **Unstoppable**, because the word of God continues to spread and flourish.
- Yes the journey will be rough with storms of persecution along the way. There'll be times when it feels like more of a shipwreck than a journey. There are times when it feels like Christianity is Losing. But it isn't.

v24.

- Will you live by the hidden hand of God?
- We can't always see what he's doing.
- But his word the Bible explains it. Will you look through the lens of the Scriptures?
- He is advancing the message of his gospel
- Will you come on board
- In prayer, in giving, in inviting friends to church online and in person?
- It's never been easier to invite someone to church- send them a link.
- As we set out from port God willing into a new post restriction era, will you join in?

- Let's pray.