

## ST PETER CONTINUED KNOCKING

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The story of St Peter's escape from prison at the time when his life was threatened by King Herod is told in the Acts of the Apostles with remarkable fullness of detail. How he passed through the first and second wards of the prison and then came to the iron gate that leads to the city; how he went up one street before he lost sight of his Angel Deliverer, then stood there considering his position and decided that it would be best to go to the house of John Mark. How he knocked there in the gateway. How a servant girl came to open the grille, and even what her name was. How the people inside the house were occupied at the moment in praying for their imprisoned brother. How they refused to believe that it could really be Peter himself, and how he stood at the door still knocking while they still argued inside. All told with a personal touch, yet St Luke could not know Jerusalem very well, and information must have been usually second-hand, therefore how is it that in this one chapter St Luke has dealt so faithfully with this subject? My impression is that St Luke got his narrative here from an eye-witness. In the last verse of chapter eleven, just before this narrative, you will see that the Christians at Antioch were warned by prophecy of a famine which was soon to affect Jerusalem. They determined to send alms to the Church there, and they did so by the hands of St Barnabas and St Paul.

St Paul was little known in Jerusalem in those days, and he would keep close to the side of St Barnabas. St Barnabas would be almost sure to stay with his nephew – at the house of John Mark. It would be at this house they stayed. It would be at this house that they heard one morning the terrible news: "Herod has arrested the Prince of the Apostles – Peter in all likelihood is to go the same way as James".

Only fifteen years since the Ascension – so much work still to do. The Church still so weak and so scattered, and now it is to lose its head. They fall to prayer in the house of John Mark, and night finds them still praying – John Mark and his mother, Mary, her brother or brother-in-law, the Levite Barnabas; with him the great, clever convert, who was persecuting the Church little more than a dozen years ago, and a great company of others, among them the servant girl, Rhoda – the rather self-important, not very efficient presbytery maid. A knock at the door breaks in upon the murmur of their intercession. What is it? Fresh persecution? Never mind, Rhoda knows her duty – she will answer the front door. As she opens it, she hears a whisper and recognizes the voice – once before he had been recognized by a maid who opened the door – with unfortunate results. Nothing of the Protestant about Rhoda – she knows the Pope's voice; so full of the news, she does not stop to reflect whether it be undignified or cold for her guest to be kept waiting, but she rushes in to the family prayers with the announcement that Peter himself is asking admittance. Do they hasten to let him in? Why no, they have only Rhoda's word for it, and that girl would say anything. They try to soothe her, "Hush, you are excited – you had better go to bed. These long prayers have been too much for you, and you have begun to imagine things. Go to bed – you will be all right in the morning." Rhoda stands her ground. She is not one to imagine things. She ought to know Peter's voice when she hears it. Then they consider a fresh tack – perhaps the girl has seen something after all. One has heard strange stories before now of men about to die being seen by their friends at a distance, sometimes miles away. Is this some such apparition? Has Peter been murdered – another martyr? They say to her "It is his angel", and all the time the real Peter stands there knocking, almost fifteen years to the day since he stood knocking at the door of Pilate's Praetorium. Then somebody – St Barnabas, I think, for he was a practical and hospitable man – suggests it might be worth while going to the door to see if anyone is there – and there stands St Peter with his finger on his lip.

I hope you will not think me fanciful if I say that this group of Christians praying in the house of John Mark reminds me of a certain school in the Church of England – a certain group of men, not a large one, who are not any longer content to assail the papacy with hard names or to ignore it as if it did not exist – a group which has a friendly attitude and yet refuses to shake off the fetters of its Protestantism. "Believe in the Pope? Of course we believe in the Pope" and they will tell you – "When England was Catholic in the Middle Ages our fathers owed allegiance to Rome and they were right to do so. We too would have suffered in the days of the Martyrs if need be for the privileges of the papacy. Just at present, owing to this unfortunate misunderstanding about Anglican Orders, we are not quite on such close terms with the Vatican as we should like to be, but we would be friends with the Pope if he would let us, and we shall one day achieve reunion with the Vatican and be one once more."

They cannot say “We have a Pope” but “We had a Pope in the Middle Ages, we would have had a Pope at the time of the Reformation; we would have a Pope now, if only the Pope would take us on our own terms. We shall have a Pope some day.” They pray for a Pope, like the faithful souls gathered in John Mark’s house, but they pray for an imaginary Pope, a historical memory or an ideal fiction. They know that a Pope is necessary to their system. They see their own Church torn with rivalries and dissension. They know that such rivalries and dissensions must be in a Church which replaces the principle of authority by the principle of compromise. They see it riddled with heresies and they know there is no safeguard against the occurrence of such heresies unless the gift of infallibility is centered in one man. They feel themselves to be at best an imperial institution – the Church of Lambeth, or at best the Church of Wembley. They know no power can unite living churches all over the world except the power which has no nationality. They know no voice can be heard over the tumult except one that speaks from another world. Many souls gathered in prayer, but no Pope, and therefore no Church – and all the time Peter stands knocking at the door – a real Pope, a figure in flesh and blood, a prince in being, and by these would-be Catholics of another faith, with all their devotion to an imaginary Pope, the real Pope is cold-shouldered and ignored.

Sometimes one of their number listens to the knocking at the door, listens and is attracted. “How strange that he whom we have longed for so greatly should be waiting at our doors all the time.” No time must be lost clearly in telling the others. “Look, Peter stands at the gate” – and that message is the signal for contradictions – “A fancy, a mere fancy, you are letting your imagination run away with you – it is an attack of nerves – take it easy for a bit – you will find you think differently in a month or two.” Or, if the questioner is not content with these explanations, “What you see is not the real Pope, but a ghost of the Pope – he who reigns at the Vatican is no true prince of Christendom but a phantom of a historical institution, an anachronism, a pathetic survival of the power of the papacy – dead, dying, or, at any rate, just going to die.”

God forgive all those who thoughtlessly embarrass the soul already trying to obey the voice of conscience. If the papacy be dead, then the Catholic Church is dead, and if the Catholic Church be dead, Christ has failed. Close down the churches. Shut up the Bible. Let us have no grinning death mask of Anglo-Catholicism to mock at our despair.

But Peter is still there. All the fury of Herod has spent itself in vain. Peter’s prison on Easter even, like his Master’s tomb on Easter morning, stands empty. We have a Pope.

But now I may be speaking this evening to some non-Catholics who are not interested in any of these High Church vagaries. I may be speaking to people who do not call themselves Catholic. They are plain Church of England people, or plain, old-fashioned Nonconformists. They do not believe in the Pope. They do not want a Pope. They do not see what is the use of the Pope. They have been brought up to think of him as an unscrupulous foreign tyrant, whose claim to exercise authority over men’s consciences is an insult to freeborn Englishmen. They think of him as a tiresome inspector who goes round interfering with other people’s business. They do not see why they should take an interest in a Roman Italian Bishop. If you feel like that, you must not expect me to talk you round in five minutes; but for five minutes I should like to put another point of view before you: to say what we mean by the papacy and the value we set on it; our attitude to the person and to the office of the Pope. You think of the Catholic Church as one of these vast business concerns, with depots all over the world, controlled from a single centre. You think all Catholics are ordered about by their priests, and of the priests as so many tools, following in blind obedience daily a policy dictated, presumably on the telephone, by their bishops; of the bishops as so many foremen, obeying a policy dictated to them from day to day, by wireless, I suppose, from the Pope. You say: “That explains the success of the Catholic Church – it is a business affair, carried on in the most efficient and most unscrupulous way possible, and the head of it, the centre of it all, is one man at the Vatican”. You say it is incredible the way he has succeeded in imposing his will over three (or three hundred?) millions of mankind. The Church of Rome to you is a vast machine, working with all the smoothness of a machine, and one single man controls the lever, and that is your idea, or something like your idea.

I wish I had the time and I wish I had the language to explain to you how gloriously wrong is that impression of the Catholic Church. Every Catholic knows that his Church is a splendidly happy-go-lucky

affair – often haphazard, with sometimes internal quarrels – and that it would not hold together for ten years if there were not supernatural life and unity in this Divine Church.

Let me put to you instead the true idea of the feeling which Catholics have towards the Pope, and our attitude towards his authority, which and where that authority has to be exercised. Did it never occur to you that we call the Pope the Holy Father because we think of him as our father? That the unity of the Church is not the unity of a machine but the unity of a great family? That our obedience to the Holy Father in that very limited range of affairs in which he demands our obedience is not that of a workman towards the foreman who will sack him if he doesn't work, but it is that of children towards their father – each eager to outdo the others in showing affection; each eager to outstrip the others in anticipating his slightest wish? That we obey him in effect not because we fear him as the doorkeeper of heaven, but because we love him as the shepherd of Christians, of Christ's flock?

Did it never occur to you that the Pope, on his side, as he looks out over the turmoil and distress of this troubled world, looks at it not with the eyes of a crafty schemer, but with the eyes of a father, longing for the salvation of souls; heartbroken sometimes at the waywardness of his children, overjoyed sometimes when they come back to him, as children will to their father and ask him to make it up? Do you not see that he thinks of you and of all those Christians who renounced his authority as the father in the parable thought of his prodigal son, longing for the Protestant nations of the world to come back from their wandering and to find rest and content in their true home? He knocks at your door, people of England, not like a tyrant demanding submission, but like a father appealing for a welcome, and for the recognition which his unfilial sons refuse.

“Peter stood at the door without and continued knocking” as he knocked long ago in the shade of the porch, while the souls within busied themselves, shutting their ears to the noise, till at last they rose to let him in. So he knocks still, while souls that profess to hold him in all reverence shut their ears and invent comfortable theories; because they cannot or will not come out to seek him in the darkness and the storm. He knocks patiently, for the fisherman has learnt patience. He knocks gently, for his shepherd heart knows that bullying will do no good. But don't mistake his errand. He has keys on his shoulder. It is the doorkeeper who knocks.

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