29 September 2019: Choral Matins
Michael and All Angels
Daniel 12:1–4, Acts 12:1–11
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Some years ago I led a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was my first visit and I can remember it so clearly, staying in Jerusalem and in Galilee and spending time in and around the holy sites. Many were filled with tour parties during the day, so when I could I would go exploring before breakfast or after dark when all was quiet.

One evening, I was exploring in the narrow alleys in the old city of Jerusalem. I was in the Armenian quarter, looking for the Syrian Orthodox community in St Mark’s Convent. I was going partly because our diocese had established a special link with them, as partners for peace and reconciliation and a church that had suffered much persecution. But I was also going in search of St Mark’s because of its history. The Convent is built over what is claimed to be the house of John Mark, and his mother Mary. John Mark is a companion of Luke and Paul in the bible book Acts of the Apostles that we heard from today, and of course Mark’s gospel is attributed to him. Inside their chapel is the great chair said to have belonged to James, the brother of Jesus. Also a room they claim, with good foundation, to have been the Upper Room of the Last Supper. Rather confusingly that is now under floor level as is almost everything in Jerusalem from two thousand years ago!

St Mark’s is definitely off the tourist track, and the winding streets around it were almost deserted. As it got dark I was beginning to feel in danger of getting seriously lost when I heard a chapel bell, and then saw their door, and knocked on it loudly. The door opened and I was welcomed inside.

In today’s story from Acts 12 Herod had shut Peter in prison, chained to two guards. Today we read of Peter’s miraculous escape with the help of a mysterious angel. If you read on he goes to the same site that I had done, and he too knocks on the door and waits to be let in.
The house of John Mark’s mother was at that time the centre of this fledgling Christian movement. With Herod on the rampage the early church were shut inside, praying. I love the detail of the servant called Rhoda, coming to answer the door. Peter is left hanging outside, as Rhoda goes back to tell everyone that it is not Herod’s police, but Peter himself, free from prison. They tell her she is mad, and that maybe it’s a ghost or Peter’s angel, but eventually the door is opened and Peter himself comes in out of the cold, and stands in their midst to much rejoicing. St Luke, author of Luke’s gospel and of this passage was probably present in the house of John Mark at the time, and writes as an eye witness would of that unforgettable night. Also present is the man whose great chair I was shown when I had visited, James the brother of Jesus. Peter was now a marked man and slipped away, and James became the leader of that Jerusalem church. Chapter 12 ends with the fury of the thwarted Herod. He executes the guards who had lost the prisoner Peter. And Herod, Luke tells us, himself dies suddenly, struck down at the height of his earthly power, standing before the people, dressed in shining robes and being acclaimed as a God.

Luke is giving us a climactic end to the first half of Acts. The Kingly rule of God in Christ had been made known throughout Judea. At first this was a challenge only to religious fundamentalists who could not bear diversity, other faith groups or alternative narratives and Stephen is stoned to death as the first Christian martyr. Finally, the growing church is seen as a sufficient threat that they come to the attention of Herod himself. Herod kills James, to whom Jesus had said ‘Can you drink the cup that I drink’, then goes for the top in Peter. But this time one who seems weak in the world’s eyes triumphs over the strong and it is Herod who comes to the sticky end.

Corrupt earthly power will always, in the end, come crashing down, tower and temple fall to dust. But as the hymn writer says it is God’s power, hour by hour, that is my temple and my tower. God’s kingly rule in Jesus, the kingdom of God as it’s called, is eternal.

As Part One of Acts draws to a dramatic close, Luke will lead his readers into Chapter 13 and the worldwide mission of the church in Part 2, as the kingly rule of God in Christ is shown and discovered all over the known world.

Lessons for us today:

However hopeless things may feel, at home, at work, in our country or wider world. Ultimately God in Christ is in charge. That doesn’t mean trouble won’t happen. As
scripture says there will tragically be war, and famine and natural disasters, but within and beyond it all God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And so there will be moments of crystal brightness as when Peter was rescued from prison against all the odds and the door flung open as he is reunited with Luke and the early church family.

People with power, position and prestige will go to great lengths to hold onto it, and can react with paranoid rage and violence when it is threatened. That force can be devastating, as when James was put to death. But ultimately God is in charge, as Peter was able to show in today’s lesson. Sometimes it’s only when all seems lost, that we can really see the living God, bearing us up.