



ST. STEPHEN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH
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The Seventh Sunday After Trinity, August 3rd, 2014
✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Four days ago we celebrated Lammas Day and, at the same time, the quaintly named Feast of St. Peter's Chains. And until many in what used to be known as Christendom replaced faith in God with faith in human cleverness, the twin feasts made August 1st one of the most important days in the church year.

Lammas is a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon "*hlaf mas*" or "Loaf Mass." It is the celebration of the wheat harvest. Loaves baked from the newly harvested grain wheat were taken to church where they were blessed. This, it was believed, conferred on them properties that could cure illnesses and protect the hearth and home.

The Feast of St. Peter's Chains or *St. Peter ad Vincula* commemorates St. Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison where he was awaiting King Herod Agrippa's executioner. Herod had already executed St. James, the brother of John. And when he saw that it pleased the people of Jerusalem, he ordered Peter's arrest.

Peter was sleeping chained to four soldiers, says St. Luke, when an angel appeared. Peter's fetters fell off, his cell door swung open and the angel led him out through the prison's massive main gate. Luke records that Peter thought he was dreaming until he actually found himself standing outside in the street.

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, the King of Judea at the time of Jesus Christ's birth, and nephew of Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Galilee and Perea, who murdered John the Baptist. The Herodians owed their power to the patronage of the Romans, but it would be wrong to picture them merely as puppets. They were nothing

of the sort. They were not only men of exquisite taste, but also visionaries, great generals, and able administrators.

But their finer qualities were marred by a streak of viciousness and cruelty that seems to have infected the genetic make up of the entire clan. Thus we do not remember them for their truly great achievements – the victories they won and the cities they built – but rather for the multiplicity of their victims.

Revisionist scholars have accused St. Matthew of maligning Herod the Great with his account of the slaughter of all of the toddlers in the neighborhood of Bethlehem in an effort to kill the Messiah. Actually, it was typical of Herod. In a fit of rage he executed his adored wife Mariame, and his favorite son and heir Antipater. The Massacre of the Innocents was just one in a string of similar atrocities.

Herod Antipas I – son of the murdered Antipater – was perhaps a tad more refined than his grandfather. He had been raised as a personal ward of the Emperor Tiberius in Rome. His close friendship with the Emperor Caligula no doubt nourished his taste for cruelty.

His ruthlessness is on full display in the 12th Chapter of the Book of Acts. Luke writes: "Now about that time [A.D. 44, 11 years after the Crucifixion] Herod the King stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword, and because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter."

This brief statement paints a chillingly complete picture of Antipas' character. He would not hesitate to kill an innocent person in order to court a moment or two of popularity with a troublesome section of the population.

And shortly before he executed James and imprisoned Peter, he sorely needed popularity. Antipas had angered Jerusalem's religious community by planning to stage a magnificent athletics competition in the stadium at Jerusalem, right on the Feast of the Passover.

Devout Jews considered athletics sheer obscenity. It was the worst sacrilege, they protested, for naked athletes not merely to perform in the holy city, but to do so during holiest festival of the year. And, like the ultra-orthodox Hasids in Jerusalem today, they tended to show their disapproval by rioting. Antipas put James to the sword and arrested Peter to appease them.

The strategy worked. The city remained relatively calm. But the crime profited Antipas not at all. Luke records what happened in the 12th Chapter of Acts:

"Upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout saying, 'It is the voice of a god, not the voice of a man.' And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost."

Like his grandfather and uncle before him, Antipas died a hard and painful death – a death that was generally regarded by his subjects as divine retribution. But what of the apostles who were Antipas' victims?

It is fashionable these days to think of them as crude and unlettered peasants. But, actually, the notion that the apostles were horny-handed sons of toil is quite at odds with the evidence.

When Jesus called Matthew, for example, he was a wealthy tax farmer – a ruthless go-getter with a good MBA. Judas Iscariot and Simon Zelotes, by contrast, were nationalist intellectuals – a type of young guys found in profusion in our universities. James, John and Peter are usually portrayed as simple fishermen. In reality they were partners with Zebedee, the father of James and John, in operating a fishing fleet. Luke tells us "they forsook all" to follow Jesus, implying they had a great deal to forsake. Mark records they walked away from it all, leaving Zebedee and the hired

hands speechless. Simple fishermen don't employ hired hands.

It is also believed that James and John were members of Jerusalem's high society. Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, is believed to have met with Jesus at their fashionable city house. John's detailed account of the meeting indicates he was present during the encounter.

As well as being quite well off, James and John were clearly men of considerable political ambition. Mark says they openly lobbied Jesus for top jobs in his political administration. Matthew tells us they also put their mother up to lobby Jesus on their behalf.

This did not endear them to their fellow disciples – not because they thought it immodest for people to campaign for top jobs with the Son of God, but because they wanted the top jobs themselves.

The lives of Peter, James, John and their fellow disciples tell us not that they were giants among men, but that, in fact, they were very ordinary folks like ourselves – and prey to the same petty fears, jealousies and ambitions as we are.

Maybe it is disappointing to find out that they weren't stern patriarchs cast in the Old Testament mold. But in truth, it should be comforting. For these very ordinary men – hot tempered, impetuous, ambitious, jealous and cowardly – were the people Jesus chose to spread His Gospel throughout the world. And how brilliantly they succeeded.

Today's Gospel – St Mark's account of the Feeding of the Four Thousand – explains how they did it. Mark reports the disciples asked: "From when can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?"

The miracle demonstrates that, when we have God to help us, there is nothing to fear when we undertake the rather more modest commissions he gives us. *AMEN.*