

THE ARCHDEACON OF NORTHAMPTON'S CHARGE TO CHURCHWARDENS 2026

“Meanwhile Peter continued knocking.” Acts 12: 16

Do you expect God to act?

In the mid-1980s, when I was a curate, Jackie and I ran a home group. It was a chance to learn more about our faith through quite an informal Bible study. At the end of each session, we would chat over the compulsory custard creams and coffee – otherwise known as “the main event.” Sandwiched apologetically between the Bible study and the main event was a prayer time. One day, a young mum called Sheena got up to leave before the prayer time. Due to a full home life, she was usually the last to arrive and the first to leave – but it was always great to see her. As she left the room, she paused and said, “By the way, would you pray for my headaches – they’ve been going on for weeks. Thanks!” So, almost as an afterthought, with those custard creams occupying the front of our minds, we said something like, “Lord, please give Sheena some relief from her headaches. Amen. Right, who wants coffee?” A few weeks passed before we saw Sheena again. “Thanks for praying about my headaches,” she said, “I haven’t had any trouble since.” I would like to say that we were not at all surprised, but duly thanked God for answering the prayer that we never for a moment doubted would be answered. What we actually said was, “Wow! How did that happen?! What a coincidence!” We prayed a rushed prayer with no expectation that God would act, and God graciously answered our faithless prayer. God is truly gracious and wonderfully patient with us.

Which brings me to Peter in prison. I would like you to notice a few things from this passage:

- James has already been arrested and killed. Peter is in prison. In reality, he is on death row.
- Peter is chained and very well guarded in prison.
- The local church is praying for Peter through the night.
- An angel (God’s messenger) appears to Peter. I grew up in a vicarage. There was usually a homeless person at the door, a Mother’s Union meeting in the lounge and a youth group in the basement. Mum used to tell us, as we served yet another bottle of tea to a bearded stranger whose possessions were gathered round him in carrier bags, “in entertaining strangers, some of you have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hebrews. At mum’s funeral we left church to “A nightingale sang in Berkley Square.” “There were angels dining at The Ritz, and a nightingale sang in Berkley Square. She would have said, God’s angels could be anywhere, even The Ritz. Even in the prison with Peter.
- The events that follow are part of Charles Wesley’s hymn, “And can it be?” He links his own conversion story with Peter’s release from prison.

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off; my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*

- Peter is rescued and runs to a house where the local Christians are praying for his release. Important point!
- Rhoda, the servant, hears Peter knocking at the door, realises it is Peter, and is so surprised that she leaves him knocking and runs into the prayer meeting.
- She tells the group that Peter is at the door, and they say something along the lines of, "Don't be ridiculous. We're praying for his release from prison!"
- Meanwhile Peter keeps knocking until they let him in. "Wow! How did that happen?! What a coincidence!" they might have said, like we did upon hearing that Shena's headaches had stopped.

When the great preacher and evangelist, David Watson, died of cancer, someone said to his widow, "If you had more faith, David would not have died." Unfeeling, damaging and untrue. Those praying for Peter's release seemed to have no expectation or faith that Peter would be released from prison. And yet, God freed him. He is sovereign. When we prayed for Shena, we were enroute to the custard creams and had little expectation that God would intervene. And yet, God acted. It was not the amount of faith that mattered. We are told to have a tiny amount of faith (the size of a mustard seed). Small faith but great God. Our gracious and loving Lord hears the prayers of his faithless and unexpectant people. Isn't that wonderful. It's not all about us. It's all about him. Always.

Do you expect God to act?

The great Northamptonshire missionary, William Carey, famously said, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God." He expected God to act. Do you? Do I?

There are many famous sayings of the car manufacturer, Henry Ford. My favourite is, "Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're probably right." Ever heard these words at a PCC: "It will never work. What's the point? No one will come." If that's the attitude, you're probably right. I was once chairing a PCC and suggested that it would be helpful to have a church noticeboard outside, so that we could advertise our events, and the villagers would see that the church is alive and well. An older gentleman replied, "We tried that after the war, but Mrs Harrison's mother said that it looked as if the church was up for sale – so we took the board down again." I pointed out that Mrs Harrison's mother must have been dead for decades and that perhaps it was time to try again. The old gentleman was not convinced, but most of the PCC were happy to give it a shot. It wasn't a big thing. Most of our decisions aren't. But even in the little things it's good to have our glass half full. "Whether you think you can or whether you think you

can't, you're probably right." "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

We are called to have just a tiny bit of faith. Maybe just enough faith to say the words of a prayer. We have this mustard seed faith in a great, gracious and loving God. The God who released Peter from death row. The God who healed Sheena on a post-war council estate in 1980s Swindon. The God who acted despite a faithless and unexpectant group of people in a prayer meeting.

What's God going to do in your church this year?

I was telling you about my curacy in the 1980s, when Jackie and I met Sheena. My training incumbent, Arthur, liked to challenge his curates. I arrived in June. A couple of weeks later he asked, "How long does it take to plan a children's holiday club?" I had been leading holiday clubs since I was in my teens. "Well, to run a holiday club in the summer we would start to assemble a team in January ... we would pray ... we would begin planning ... we would approach venues ... we would train the team ... gather equipment ... identify leaders ... look at publicity ... put a band together ... form a refreshments team ... get some craft materials ..." The list was extensive. He smiled. I knew what was coming. "Could you run a holiday club four weeks from today?" What I was thinking was, "FOUR WEEKS FROM TODAY?!" What I said was, "Yeah, go on then." We had a fabulous week. I don't recommend such last-minute planning, but the one advantage was that we had to lean heavily on God. Our prayer could have been, "Lord, please take our minimal and inadequate preparations and make something beautiful." A bit like the young lad who gave his packed lunch to Jesus to share amongst 5000 hungry people on a hillside. Over to you, Jesus.

What's God going to do in your church this year?

What are your expectations?

Finally, churchwardens, thank you for all you do. You are the Bishop's Officers, but many of you are so much more than that. You are pastors to your congregation. You are encouragers to your priest. You are prayerful in good times and bad. You are first to an event and the last to leave. You are the king or queen of rotas. You are the experts in church and churchyard maintenance. You are the one who takes the flack but so often never hears the praise. And Jesus says, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Don't lose sight of Jesus.

There's an old hymn which says,

*"Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face,
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."*

And, in these challenging times, don't lose hope.

Do you expect God to act? You know he will.

Let's pray:

Lord, transform our churches, we pray.

Pour out your Spirit and bring new life.

We have just a little faith and our times are so challenging.

Thank you that we can trust you –

our good, gracious and loving Lord. Amen.