

*For this my son was dead, and is alive again*

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Today, along with the Ninth Sunday after Trinity we celebrate the Feast of St Peter's Chains. Last Sunday, the feast of St James the Great, we heard how Herod arrested St James and sentenced him to death by the sword, and because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he decided to throw Peter also into prison, intending to do to him as he had done to James. But this was not to be, for the Church was praying, and the night before Peter was to be martyred, he was miraculously delivered from prison. St Peter's escape from prison was like something we would see in a movie. St Peter, asleep in his cell, was awakened by an angel. He got up, the chains fell off him and he walked past the guards without notice. Even the gate of the prison opened before him as he walked away free. Peter immediately goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the early church was gathered in prayer. St Peter knocked at the door of the house church and the girl who opened it was so surprised to see him that she slammed the door in his face! The others present when they saw that it was truly Peter escaped from prison, they were astonished.

Peter's miraculous escape from prison is remarkable, the scriptures record that even the gate of the prison opened before him, but the church was so surprised to see him that they slammed their door in his face. They thought for a moment that the Peter that stood before them was a ghost. They had already given him up for dead. We remember that at this point in life Peter was no longer the prodigal cowering disciple. Peter was imprisoned for being the faithful Apostle of Christ. The Apostle who's work for the Kingdom of Heaven at this point was not yet completed. The Church prayed for Peter, we do not know what type of prayers they prayed, if they prayed for his release or for mercy, they knew what had been done to St. James, and surely Peter was as good as dead.

We notice in the Gospel for today, the Parable of the prodigal son, that a similar comment is made about the return of the prodigal son. The father embraces his son and tells his jealous brother that they kill the fatted calf and throw a great feast, *because this my son was dead and now is alive again*. The prodigal son was also given up for dead, and at his return his father is so astonished and overwhelmed with joy that he runs to meet his son, something which in that day

and age would be just as startling to Jesus' listeners then as slamming a door in St Peter's face is to us today. The message is clear though, to walk away from God the Father is spiritual death. To return into union and communion with God the Father is life, and God rejoices over the return of every prodigal son and daughter.

St Peter was loosed from his chains and set free from his prison cell as a type of sign to us and to every prodigal son and daughter. God hears the prayers of Mother Church and has entrusted to her apostles and priests the keys to the kingdom of heaven, *that whatsoever sins they remit are remitted and whatsoever sins they retain are retained*. God calls all the prodigal back home to His church where through the power of God, through the Sacraments of the Church, they are loosed from the chains of their sins. How grateful we should be that we can receive the grace of God through His Sacraments, that we can confess our sins, and go forward in life with a clean slate.

It's hard to watch God's children wander away from Him, to where they do not belong, but we as the church are called to pray that they will return to God and to His Church. Unlike the brother of the prodigal son, we are called to rejoice when they do return, to encourage them in the faith. Let us remember that it was not just the prodigal who needed to surrender his life to the Father, but his brother too. The brother complained about the lavish reception that prodigal son received when he returned, ridiculing his brother and father, asking why such was never done for him. He says, *Lo, this many years do I serve thee, neither transgresses I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf*. And his father answered him, *Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine*. The Prodigal Son wandered away, was spiritually dead and was bound hand and foot in the chains of sin, the brother never left the Father's side, and yet he wore chains of his own choosing, the chains of jealousy and envy.

The chains of jealousy and envy, the chains we wear of our own choosing, the chains that come from a prodigal lifestyle, they do not discriminate in shackling us from the true freedom that God intends for us. God wants to release us from the sins that bind us. He has promised to restore us from spiritual death to newness of life. He desires to rejoice over our return to His House, to say over us, *this my*

*son was dead is alive again; he who was lost is found.* And let us remember that as long as there are prodigals wandering in the world, we as the Church must pray for their return, and so today we pray, *O God, who didst cause the blessed Apostle Peter to be loosed from his chains, and to go forth unhurt: loose, we beseech thee, the chains of our sins, and mercifully shut out from us all evils. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*