

# Esther

Readings: Esther 9: (20)23-32; James 3:13-4:7a

One of my favourite pastimes is to poke around in second hand shops. There is that wonderful sense of surprise when you come across a gem of a CD, a book, or just a knick knack, with a sense of fancy finding that here.

I had a similar sense this week as in preparation for this sermon I reread the book of Esther. Here is a gem of a story. It has all the ingredients of a classic, sex, revenge, humour, a fair degree of violence, and is wonderfully told. It is a true delight to read, and I encourage everyone to go home tonight and read it prior to going to bed. But there is also a sense of “Fancy finding this in the Bible”, not just because of the earthy sort of story that it is, but because as you read it, and reread it God doesn't rate a mention. As we look at this story we will then have to consider why is it in God's word and what does it have to teach us as we gather in church.

## THE BOOK OF ESTHER

As the book of Esther ends it is pretty clear why was written. As our reading for this evening shows it was written to explain the Jewish festival of Purim, a very raucous celebration, the last of the Jewish Calendar, still held around a month prior to Passover. This celebration was because the Jews had got relief from their enemies during the reign of Xerxes (or Ahasuerus) their sorrow was turning into joy and mourning to celebration so there was to be feasting and gift giving (9:22-23).

The basic plot line of the book is also recounted but it is perhaps worth giving a very quick summary of the tale.

### Setting the scene

The story starts in the opulence of the vast Persian Empire when King Ahasuerus throws a massive party to show off all his items of beauty, including it turns out, Queen Vashti. But in the kind of ironic twist so beloved in this tale, the King who reigns from India to Egypt, 127 provinces in all, can't in reality even control his own wife, who refuses to come. The weakness of the King's rule is shown in that he doesn't seem to know how to respond. He calls together his advisors, who after much discussion, and concern that all women might start disregarding their husbands, decide that the Queen should be no longer be allowed into the King's presence and should be replaced.

You get the feeling that Vashti would not have been that upset by this decision but Ahasuerus soon is as he no longer has a beautiful Queen. A sort of “Who will be Persia's next supermodel” is held which is won by a beautiful Jewish orphan called Esther, with the strong implication that she was also the best in bed. She is proclaimed Queen.

Esther has an Uncle named Mordecai, of the same family as King Saul, exiled from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, who keeps an eye on Esther and along the way manages to foil an attempt on the King's life.

### The Plot thickens

The villain of the story then enters, Haman the Agagite, who is honoured by the King but before whom Mordecai refuses to bow. Such intransigence may have been caused because of unfinished business from Saul's reign, or the ongoing tensions between Jews and Agagites but whatever the reason it infuriates Haman who decides

that on a date chose by casting *pur*, lots, he will to do away with all the Jews in the Kingdom, which would pretty much mean all Jews.

As we have come to expect from the story, the King is reasonably easily swayed by his advisor to do away with these people who keep themselves separate and have different customs. So an unrepeatable decree is issued authorising a massacre on the set date.

The Jews understandably are in mourning but Mordecai sends word to Esther to use her position to help. She is not keen because to approach the King without being summoned is punishable by death. Mordecai responds "Do not think that in the King's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (4:14)

### **Esther into action**

Esther asks the Jews in the city to fast and she takes her life in her hands and goes to the King, but rather than directly appealing to him she asks that he and Haman attend a banquet, which they do and are then invited to a repeat performance the following night.

Haman is thrilled to have such access to the royal couple, but this simply makes him even angrier at Mordecai's disrespect so on the advice of his wife he builds a massive gallows on which to hang Mordecai in the morning.

### **A series of reversals**

We then have the funniest chapter of the book; that same night the King can't sleep and so asks that the record of his reign be read to him. He is therefore reminded that he has done nothing to reward Mordecai for saving his life. Haman enters and is asked what the King should do for the man he honours. Assuming that the King is referring to him, Haman suggests a great procession which he then is ordered to organise for Mordecai. Oh the horror! The chapter ends with Haman's wife resigned to her husband's fate assuring him that he cannot possibly stand against someone of Jewish origin.

That very night the second banquet is held and Esther pleads for her life and for the life of her people and Haman is revealed as the villain. The King in a fury leaves, Haman now pleads for his life, falling at Esther's feet. The King returns and assumes that Haman is now molesting his wife. The massive gallows Haman built for Mordecai is conveniently discovered and he is hoisted on his own petard.

Esther is given Haman's estate but the problem of the first decree is still pressing. Whilst it cannot be repealed, a second decree is sent out which authorises the Jews to protect themselves, which they then do. So rather than being triumphed over by their enemies the Jews triumph over them.

And so celebration is appropriate.

## **APPLICATIONS**

Again it is a wonderful story and please do read it. But what are we to do with.

### **Anti Semitism**

Esther is the most Jewish book in the Old Testament, with the word Jew being used repeatedly, even monotonously. And the Jews are under threat simply for being Jews, simply for being different, even though it seems they are productive citizens of the empire.

Many commentators have noted then that the book issues a warning against anti Semitism, something that sadly was around long before Nazi Germany. This can be widened to lead us to renounce racism of all kinds. People's race, gender or creed should not be a reason for rejection as people. But it reminds us particularly that the rejection of God's historic people is particularly unfortunate.

### **Deliverance of God's People**

This leads us to remember that it is not simply one race amongst many who are under threat in the Book of Esther, it is the Jews, God's people and a threat to God's people is ultimately a threat against God's purpose for the world. God has promised that it will be through Abraham's descendants that all people on earth will be blessed. In this universal threat to God's people, there is a threat to God's plan in the universe.

Whilst God is not mentioned, it is hard not to see the unseen and unremarked hand of God in the story. Esther just happens to be Queen, Mordecai just happens to overhear a plot against the king, the King just happens to not be able to sleep and so on. At the very least the Jews are very, very, very lucky!

### **Celebrating Salvation**

As God has acted to save his people then celebration is the right response. This was a celebration with great creativity; you only have to read the story. It is a celebration that everyone joined in with. At each Purim festival the story of Esther is read. You can imagine the delight that people have hearing this story as the baddies get their comeuppance. Every time Haman is mentioned, the listeners would boo. I was quite tempted to simply read the book through that way so that we could see what it was like.

This reminds us that we should all participate in celebrating the salvation that we have in Christ. It should bring us joy and we should celebrate it with creativity and feasting.

### **The problems of the story; Maybe we are here for this reason.**

But whilst there may be much that we can helpfully think through I have so far simply dodged the problem of the book: why is God not mentioned? Actually it is worse than that, it seems that he has been deliberately removed, for there is no religious language at all, no mention of prayer, even when fasting is mentioned and prayer is obviously implied.

We also have to deal with the fact that the main characters are hardly paragons of virtue. Esther whilst with some encouragement eventually is willing to risk her life, she has kept her heritage secret, is married to a Gentile, and was seemingly happy to participate in a beauty pageant and win through exploiting her beauty and her sexual prowess, not exactly a good Jewish girl. Mordecai, the other hero of the story, we should not forget, was actually the reason that his people were under threat. His recalcitrance in relation to Haman was the soil in which his adversary's murderous plans flowered.

The ancient translators of the book recognised all the problems and in the process of translating them in Greek simply added bits to deal with them, God gets regularly mentioned, Mordecai and Esther pray at the drop of a hat. Esther says that whilst she slept with the King, she didn't want to, and Mordecai explains himself, that it was not for his own pride but for God's honour that he acted this way.

Yet this is not the way the story was written, God is simply not there and we are left with our dubious heroes.

Perhaps this is best explained by saying that the writers had no prophetic word from the Lord to say this is why things happened, they simply wrote what happened. Being godly Jews, they were so reticent about using God's name when they had no authorisation to do so. So they removed any religious reference. But the community of God's people over time recognised that this was the Lord's doing and the story became part of the Jews and our Scriptures.

Seeing the story this way has then a powerful message for us at a number of levels.

Firstly we should be careful not to quickly ascribe things to God if we don't know. Some Christians can be all too quick to say "God told me," "God led me" etc, and they want others to know. The book of Esther gives us Scriptural warrant to be more careful

in our language. This is not to say that God does not lead and guide, he clearly does, but we should be careful in our language and let time show what the Lord has done.

Secondly recognising the flaws in both Esther and Mordecai gives us comfort that God can use such people for his purposes. They were not saints or paragons of virtue and neither are we, but God can still work through us.

Lastly such an understanding of Esther encourages us to use the opportunities that we have for his glory and his people. There needs to be no Damascus Road experience, no vision, no word from the Lord, we are simply to use the opportunities that we find before us. God's purpose will be done as Mordecai says, but as he also says when we find ourselves in a position to do good that perhaps God has put us here for such a time as this.