

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”
Esther 4:14

We have just read part of the story which makes up the book of *Esther*. It's a book we rarely really look into for all sorts of reasons. One of them is that it's in a part of the Old Testament that we don't turn to very often. It's also one of the books in the Bible that doesn't explicitly mention God. It doesn't really seem to fit into the overall story of God's plan of salvation for the world. And there are few memorable verses that stick out for us, as there seem to be in so many other books of the Bible. But it's one of my favourite stories in the Bible and I love reading it – it's poignant, inspiring and outrageously funny. In fact, at the Jewish Feast of Purim – which is today – it's read out in the synagogue and the congregation respond a bit like at a pantomime – cheering, booing and laughing.

You may have heard of Esther. You may know bits of the story, but let's spend a few minutes looking at what happened out there in Susa two thousand four hundred and seventy years ago. At the time, the ruler of Persia was the great king Xerxes. (The Persian name Khshayarshan is transliterated as Ahasuerus in older version of the Bible.) At that time there was quite a large community of Jews living under his rule – Jews who had been exiled and who had adapted to living in another country and were very much part of the life of that country.

Anyway, Xerxes was married to a woman called Vashti and she managed to fall out of favour with the King because she refused to come down to dinner when he was entertaining the cream of the Persian nobility. (It's actually the first of ten banquets mentioned in this short book!) They'd been drinking for seven days and, as the writer puts it, “*King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine.*” You bet! He called for his wife (who was having her own party with all the women) so that he could show off her beauty to everyone. Quite how he intended to do that, the writer leaves to our imagination. Understandably, perhaps, Queen Vashti declines the invitation to show off her beauty to a palace full of drunken noblemen, and stays where she is.

Well, the King is a bit offended by this and has a word with his advisors as to what should be done. They all see this behaviour as setting an appalling example to all their wives. As soon as their own wives get to hear of it, they say, “*there will be no end of disrespect and discord.*” And we can't have that, can we? She needs to be taught a lesson that may well *encourager les autres*, as they say. Clamp down on Vashti and, all being well, everyone will get the message. Memucan, the chief of the nobles says, “*When the king's edict is proclaimed throughout his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the greatest to the least.*”

The King takes the advice and banishes Vashti from his presence for ever. She is never to be seen by him again. And, perhaps to make up for his appalling chauvinism and misogyny, he ensures that his edict is proclaimed in as multicultural and politically correct a way as possible by sending dispatches “*to each part of the Kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language.*” As time goes by, however, he begins to miss the company of a wife and his attendants suggest that he might do well to find someone to replace Vashti. The kingdom is to be combed for beautiful young virgins, who will be brought into the harem at Susa and given a makeover (that’s what it says in 2:3). Once they’ve all had a proper session at the beauticians, they are to be brought before the King for him to choose a replacement wife.

One of the girls who is found by the team of wife-seekers is a Jewish girl called Hadassah. She is known by the name of Ishtar, or Esther, which is a more Persian-sounding name. She’s an orphan who has been brought up by a relative called Mordecai, but she’s taken away from her home, put in the harem at Susa, and given the beauty treatment and put on a special diet (2:9). She has a year of this treatment (six months with oil of myrrh and six months of cosmetics and perfumes – fortunately this is not something all the women of God have to go through; although goodness knows, some of them ... Never mind!) and eventually is chosen to be the next Queen of Persia, having carefully kept a secret details of her own ethnic background.

Meanwhile, cousin Mordecai happens to overhear some people plotting to assassinate the King and, via Esther, alerts Xerxes, who has the conspirators hanged. However, Mordecai also makes an enemy of the king’s right-hand man, who is called Haman. Haman has been promoted to the highest office in the Kingdom and expects everyone to kneel down when he appears and pay him homage. Mordecai isn’t on for a lot of that and refuses to kow-tow to Haman, who decides that he will not only get rid of Mordecai, but will eliminate all the Jews into the bargain. Are you following so far?

Haman lets it be known to the King that “*certain people*” (3:8) in the kingdom are likely to cause trouble and he is willing to put his own resources at the king’s disposal, if only the King will issue an edict for them to be destroyed. The King, being a bit of a hands-off ruler when it comes to that sort of thing, tells Haman to keep his money and just get on and sort it out himself, giving him his signet ring to seal any letters he needed to write. Once again, letters go off to all the provinces in all kinds of languages and scripts, telling people that the Jews are to be annihilated. Of course, these are written by Haman, but given legitimacy by the King’s own seal. And the Jews are, quite naturally, rather upset by all this. Mordecai manages to get a message to Esther asking her to use her influence on the King to have the edict rescinded. She cannot just go and talk to him, though: that means certain death for anyone not actually summoned to his presence. But she hits on the plan of having a party (something it seems they were pretty partial to in 5th century BC Persia)

and invites the King so that she can put her point of view. In the mean time she gets all the Jews to pray for her. Not a bad idea under the circumstances. Strangely, at the banquet, all she asks is that the King comes back tomorrow for another banquet, together with Haman, when she will finally reveal her request.

That night Haman has just about had enough of Mordecai's insolence, so he sets about building a seventy foot high gallows ready to hang Mordecai in the morning. Now it may be that the sound of Haman's woodwork disturbed the King, but he couldn't sleep and a series of remarkable coincidences and misunderstandings occur. Firstly, he asks for the government records to be brought to him so that he can have a read. Maybe he thought that they'd be so boring he'd fall asleep reading them. Anyway, in there he reads about the way in which Mordecai had foiled the recent assassination attempt: until then all he knew was that the message had come through Esther. So next morning he decides it's about time this Mordecai fellow was honoured. At that moment Haman comes into the court and Xerxes summons him to speak with him. "*What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?*" asks Xerxes, and Haman, thinking the King is referring to him, reels off a list of great honours and privileges (6:7-9).

You can imagine the expression on his face when the King then says, "Off you go and do all that for Mordecai, then." And no sooner has Haman had to lead his mortal enemy around the streets to general acclaim, than his taxi arrives (alright, the King's eunuchs arrive) to take him to the banquet with Esther. As they are eating, Esther puts her request to the King to spare her own life and the lives of her people. Of course, this is the first Xerxes has heard of all this, so he asks who's behind it and is told that "*this vile Haman*" (7:6) is the guilty party. The King is so enraged he has to go off into the garden to calm down.

Haman takes the opportunity to beg for mercy from Esther. Unfortunately, at the moment he throws himself down in a fit of emotion on the couch where Esther is lying, Xerxes comes back in. Now, you're the all powerful King of a mighty nation. You discover you've been duped by your closest advisor. Having calmed down slightly after a walk in the garden, you return to find this man throwing himself on your wife – well, what's a man to think? "*Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?*" (7:8). This is not a happy king, so when one of the officials points out that there just happens to be a seventy foot high gallows newly built in the courtyard, you don't have to be Professor Anthony Clare to work out what the King's response is likely to be.

Haman is hanged on his own gallows. Mordecai is honoured and given Haman's position. Esther is vindicated and given Haman's estate. The Jewish people are given the right to defend themselves against the supporters of Haman who are even now out to finish what Haman had started, and they win the day, the final

irony being that Haman's ten sons are all executed on those same gallows where their father had recently been hanged. In celebration, they instituted the feast of Purim which they've celebrated ever since.

It's a wonderful story, isn't it? It would make a great pantomime in places, and while I was reading it I kept visualising bits of it as an animated film by Disney or Dreamworks. It's not in the Bible only as a nice story, though. It's there, as is the rest of Scripture, to teach us something about God and his ways. Although he is not mentioned explicitly at all in the story, there's no doubt that he is in control. The Sovereign God will always protect his people and he manages to do it in all kinds of different and unusual ways. In this story the string of coincidences and ironies that are at the heart of it must surely point to the overall power of God: there is some meaning, some direction to the world. God does intervene in history so that his will shall be done.

And at the centre of the story is this woman Esther. It has to be said that there is nothing particular to commend her. She goes for the quiet life to start with. She hides her ethnic identity so that it doesn't become inconvenient. She initially makes an excuse not to talk to Xerxes about the pogrom. Mordecai appeals to her self-interest to get her to comply (*"Don't think that you'll escape either, just because you're in the King's house"*). But she does eventually pluck up courage to see the plan through, and she does recognise the importance of prayer in the process.

The whole story, though, turns for me on 4:14 and those words of Mordecai to his adopted daughter: *"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"* Here she is, enjoying her position as queen, basking in all the privileges that come her way through that position, and suddenly she is confronted with the idea that she might actually be there for a purpose. God has put her there for just this eventuality.

God is sovereign. He has his plans and his purposes – and **you** are part of those plans and purposes. Maybe you cannot see how on earth the things you are doing now could possibly be used by God. Maybe you have no idea what he might be doing through you. It might be that he isn't actually using you in what you think of as a meaningful way at the moment and you're getting quite frustrated by it all. But there will be a time when you will be just the right person in just the right place at just the right time.

You may well be now. The people you see each day, the conversations you have, the life you lead might be having an effect on someone that will have eternal consequences, but although you can't see it, you are in that position *"for such a time as this."* Those people in the office, the staffroom, the classroom, the gym, at

the school gate need to find out about God and you are there – now: now when they need you to be there. The temptation is to remain silent, as Esther tried to do to start with. The temptation is to hide your faith or your beliefs, as Esther did at the beginning. But you are there “*for such a time as this.*” That’s not some huge burden to carry. That’s a reason for rejoicing. God can use you. God wants to use you. In his plans and purposes you are like Esther. The right person in the right place at the right time. Open yourself up to his leading. Ask others to pray for you. Be used by him “*for such a time as this.*”