

Esther

This morning, may I continue our work of looking at the women in our Old Testament. Let us look together at the Book of Esther.

We have looked together at Deborah, Huldah, Hannah, and then Ruth and Naomi. And now Esther.

Esther is most famous as the book in our Bible which does not mention God. It mentions beauty treatments, (2 v 12) and it is a good story. But it does not anywhere mention God.

It is also, sadly xenophobic, that is, it is racist and nationalistic. It is a strong contrast to the teaching in the Book of Ruth on giving love to all people: that message it rather contradicts.

The story is set in the period of the Exile, that is, after Jerusalem has fallen by military conquest to the Babylonians, and God's chosen people have been deported. And then, Babylonian domination of the area has been replaced by the Persians, and the Persian King is Xerxes, who of course is a historically verifiable person: he reigned early in the fifth century before Christ. But that is not really important, so we will not waste time trying to decide whether or not Esther is a real person in history. The writing of the book, Esther, probably happened in the third or second centuries before Christ, some years after Xerxes.

The story is perhaps no more than a folk tale to explain why the Jews celebrate Purim. However, the Jewish feast of Purim celebrates the events of Esther's story, so that is a bit chicken-and-egg-ish. To find the right date for something to happen a method is here described called "*Pur*" or casting a lot, or perhaps dice. So *Pur* gives the name to *Purim*. A jolly detail is that in the synagogue at Purim, apparently, the congregation nowadays sound football-match-rattles at every mention of the name of the baddy in the story, Haman. We can just "boo".

Esther's name is derived from the word for Star. Our equivalent might be Stella, perhaps. And we know that Esther was very good looking. (2 v 7).

In summary, the story is this. The king of the Persians chooses Esther when he wants a wife. (The story of how the King lost his

earlier wife is good fun.) Anyway, to be the wife of King Xerxes is to be one of many wives, apparently, and is not to be equated with being the Queen. Esther is in the harem until her turn comes to warm the King's bed, and he thinks she is such a smasher that he then makes her the Queen. Later, Esther's former guardian, Mordecai, discovers a plot to kill the king. Mordecai tips off Esther, who warns her royal husband. The plot is thus frustrated. Mordecai goes unrewarded. Then Haman*, the baddy, who is the King's Minister gets immensely cocky. He gets a rule made that everyone must bow to him really low. This Mordecai refuses to do. (The story doesn't say *why*.) Haman* sees that Mordecai does not bow really low – indeed does not bow at all – and because of this, and knowing that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman* plots an attack upon all the Jews right across the vast empire of King Xerxes. (It is twenty-seven provinces, apparently: from India to Ethiopia!) The date on which Haman* acts is carefully selected by a method of finding the right date, the auspicious date, and of course that explains the date of Purim. At this point the king remembers that Mordecai hasn't been rewarded for saving him, he consults Haman* and Haman* finds himself ordered to honour Mordecai. The planned slaughter of the Jews is made public as the King authorises it, and the Jews are appropriately dismayed. All the Jews fast, and put on sackcloth, and although it does not say so, surely the implication is that they pray for deliverance. Esther decides that she must intercede with the king.

Then comes the climax of the story. The rule is that no one approaches the king uninvited. If they do, they get the chop.... unless the king holds out to that person his sceptre, indicating that they can speak to him. So, we read, Esther *“put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall.... And when the king saw Queen Esther she found favour in his sight and he held out to Esther the golden sceptre. And the king said to her, ‘What is it Queen Esther? What is your request?’”* (5 vv 1-3) Well, to cut to the quick, Esther contrives to reverse the situation. Haman* gets hanged upon the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai, not before the king loads Mordecai with honour. Mordecai becomes the king's first minister and all the good guys prosper.

It will be apparent now that this Book of Esther really belongs with the Book of Judges. It is in the same tradition. You will recall that Judges is a collection of old folk tales of heroes. Those stories

belong in a much earlier period, but the repeated theme in the Book of Judges, is again the theme of Esther : that the People of God become oppressed by a tyrant, and then God sends a hero to beat up the tyrant and restore freedoms. Here, our hero, our 'Judge', is Esther. Because, even if the Book of Esther does not mention God in this connection, the other books of our Bible which surround it, and what we know of the beliefs of those Jews, surely makes God in this book also, the Bringer of Deliverance.

So, what does Esther teach us? What can a book that does not mention our God tell us about Him? We can take from it, I think, some *implied* truths. We do this because those truths are taught everywhere else in our Bibles, and come originally from the beliefs of those very Jews we read about in the Book of Esther.

The first truth in Esther is surely the absolute sovereignty of God. God may be a hidden presence in Esther. But He is not absent. God rules the Universe. That is what Esther and Mordecai and all their Jewish community believe. God allows Xerxes to lord it over his one hundred and twenty-seven Provinces. Xerxes thinks he is a great king, his many subjects think he is a great king, you and I might think him a great king, but before Almighty God he is a puny little man. The prayers of the few people of God frustrate and alter all his plans. He is a mere puppet in the affair. The Persian Empire – all twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia – must have seemed to the people of that time, so huge, so powerful, so permanent. But God was greater. God is greater still. Absolutely supreme.

Second point: God intervenes to deliver the faithful. And that is His way, is it not? Our God is not remote, distant and unreachable, disinterested in what is going on here. He is a God who acts in history. He has not ceased to do so. In the Book of Esther, He acts to deliver His people. He does so still. So, a God of action. A God who reaches into our human existence, reaches in with power. Power to change things.

Now, no one knows better than those synagogue congregations I earlier mentioned that God's deliverance is not necessarily our welfare in *this* world. Nonetheless we proclaim as a fact that God delivers his faithful people from evil. Jesus, who suffered, says to us, "In this world you *will* have tribulation, but cheer up, I have overcome this world." (John 16 v 33)

The third truth in Esther is that worship and adoration are due to God. In all those twenty-seven provinces, it is only amongst the Jews that worship is rightly offered. Because of what happens to them, we know that they are protected by the true God. After all, events proceed to their advantage. All others in that vast empire are worshipping a nothingness. We read of the Jews in supplication, in sackcloth and ashes, and they are engaged in the rites of repentance. Turning again to God, bewailing their sin, which completely separates them from the Holiness that is God.

Nothing they can do can reach God. He has to come to them. And, as we have just seen, God does come to them. That is grace: the procession of God into human lives. He moves towards Esther's people, intervenes and delivers them. We believe He moved also towards us in the Person of Jesus Christ, we believe He moves towards us still in the Person of His Holy Spirit. His intervention is our daily experience. His deliverance repeated in our own lives and at our deaths. This is because we make him the object of our adoration and worship. He asks us to do this, and He becomes our God and we become His people. That is the New Covenant. *"Thou shalt worship the Lord God and Him only shall you serve"*. (Matthew 4 v 10, cf Exodus 20 v 3)

As a fourth point, I think we see from the Book of Esther that it is God's ultimate purpose to destroy evil. He will bring His judgment upon evil things.

Now for us, evil includes the worship of false gods – money, power, success. "Mammon" for those who did the Lent Course. But for the writers of this Book of Esther, evil was certain people, those people who (we read) are about to murder the Jews. So, a health warning. How would you expect me to comment upon Esther's chapter nine verse six and those verses that immediately follow? *"So the Jews smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In Susa the capital itself, the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men....."* Verses like that leave a conundrum. And it is no help to know that those men who are now dead were about to kill the Jews, for ... our Jesus, facing death, refused, did he not, to invoke the twelve legions of angels? And Jesus told one man not to use his sword. And Jesus told us *"love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."* (Matthew

5 v 44) Because we believe the world is redeemed by suffering, and because Jesus died upon the cross in suffering obedience, we can not read these ghastly verses of Esther with equanimity. God forbid! So, you and I leave those verses – and there are more like that in the Book of Esther – we leave those verses as the product of a mind that is not ours, is not Christian. It is a fallible mind, a human mind, from long ago. From before the revelation of God that was Jesus. The Prince of Peace. Love Incarnate. The Jesus who said “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. (Mathew 5 v 44)

But, even as we discard those verses, we must also recall that it is a promise from God that evil will not persist, it will not succeed, it will not overcome. That message is there in the prophetic voice of Isaiah, and others. It is the promise of Easter, and it is certainly the message from this Book of Esther. A message that is not merely implied, it is overt. God has promised to destroy evil, and He will.

My final point from Esther is that her Book teaches us that God gives us a duty to take action to deliver others. When her people are threatened, Esther does not hide in the harem, secure in the king’s regard. No, she puts herself in danger. The point of that passage where she appears in the royal hall is that, had Xerxes been so minded, the “unalterable law of the Medes and the Persians” would condemned Esther to death merely for standing there. She puts herself in danger, goes there, exposed to that threat. She does that although she does not know whether she can make a difference. She does not know whether her action will alter what is going to happen.

When we are convinced we can make a difference, we too might persuade ourselves to get in the way of evil. Perhaps. But I think the Christian disciple is asked for more. For us, even when we are not sure that it will make any difference at all, we are still asked to do it. Because Christian love asks that, does it not? Sacrificial love says “do it”! Give of yourself. Take action, and if it costs you, then that is the meaning of sacrificial love. Give, even if it takes life itself. Stand up and put yourself in the path of evil. Challenge it.

That is a high vocation. But we follow Jesus, the man who for us gave life itself. It is for God to decide whether our actions make a difference. We just have to do it. Take the action.

So, in summary, we have identified six teachings from this Book of Esther.

1. Our God is absolutely sovereign. He rules.
2. Our God will deliver His faithful people by mighty acts.
3. He is a God whose actions we see in our lives.
4. Worship and adoration are to be given only to our God.
5. The ultimate purposes of our God include the destruction of evil.
6. Our God asks us to act in protection and deliverance of others.

So, maybe quite a bit for us Christians in a book that does not mention God. Unlike that annual reading it gets in the synagogue, Esther is a part of the Bible that doesn't seem to get read at all in Christian churches. At least, not the ones I go to. She is not often preached about. This is the first Sermon I have ever heard about her. Her one memorable quote is "the Law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be altered". Rudyard Kipling quotes this in his *Just-so-stories*, but when did you last hear it? (Esther 1 v 19)

No, the beautiful Esther is hidden, she stays in obscurity. She has a low profile. Perhaps because of those difficult verses. Is it a pity? Esther was ***the*** glamorous Queen, in my mind's eye, she's drop-dead gorgeous. Remember, Xerxes chose her from amongst all the girls he had the choice of from all those twenty-seven provinces. Esther the beautiful. And after being so, must she not be a bit miffed to now be so overlooked? What do you think?

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