

Sermon – Pentecost 18

Esther

Our help is in the name of the Lord: who has made heaven and earth.

As I considered the texts for this week I couldn't get past the reading from Esther. It's the only time in our three year lectionary cycle that we get a portion from this unique Old Testament book and, read in isolation, it doesn't make much sense. So I thought it would be fun to have a look at the whole book of Esther and try to find some meaning and application to our volatile and uncertain world today. I also have a confession to make. I have always considered myself something of a feminist and the book of Esther introduces Queen Vashti in its first chapter who some commentators consider is the world's first documented feminist! So do find a bible and let's together have a look at the Book of Esther.

Well before we start going through the storyline, which by the way is a cracking good yarn, worthy of any contemporary movie pitch, there are a few observations about this book. It's unusual in the collection of Old Testament scripture, in that the central figure, for which the book is named, Esther, is a woman. There are no books in the New Testament named for a woman, and only one other, Ruth, in the Old Testament. There is also Judith in the Apocrypha which in style is not dissimilar to the book of Esther in that it also has a strong central female protagonist and is written like a secular narrative. Which brings me to the second point: there is no active mention of God or a deity in the book of Esther. We are left to find God in the narrative ourselves with the implication that God uses human agents to bring about God's purposes. Interestingly, the version that is contained in the Orthodox bible, is much expanded with later Greek additions, and God and the Jewish covenant are explicitly present throughout the book.

Another thing to mention is the context of the story. It was written some 100 years after the Babylonian exile. It's about the Jewish people, the diaspora, still living outside of Jerusalem, in Susa the winter residence of the Persian rulers. It's after the time that Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home and rebuild their lives and their cities. So the Jews in this book, are those who chose to stay in exile and who had made a life worth living and staying for. In fact, there is no mention of the Jewish rules that governed Jewish life and made them distinct from other cultures, and indeed Esther is able to marry the king and conceal her Jewishness with apparently little effort. Even her name Esther, is her Persian name not her Jewish name which is Hadassah. It would seem that her family had assimilated into the local society while still retaining at least a Jewish cultural identity.

So let's have a look at the book of Esther and what leads up to climax of the story which we have as our Old Testament reading today.

The story opens in chapter one with the King of the Persian Empire deposing his wife Queen Vashti. The whole book tends to use banquets as the time and place where significant things happen. The King, who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, decided to throw a series of banquets for the officials and ministers of his empire, and then also for the locals. On the 7th day when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Queen Vashti to come before him so he could show the officials and people her beauty. Well, the queen refused to come and parade herself before the drunken party makers. She was really faced with a lose-lose situation. Lose her dignity or lose her position because it was illegal to disobey the king's command. The king, angry that she had disobeyed him and concerned that this would set a precedence more broadly of wifely disobedience, deposed her. We don't hear again from Vashti, but this act of not coming before the king when he and his cronies were drunk, has led some commentators to say that she was

the first feminist, the first woman to draw a line and buck the patriarchy, and with typically dire consequences.

Vashti's departure meant that a new queen needed to be found so the king commissioned a hunt for the most beautiful young women across the kingdom to find a new wife. Young women were brought to the palace and screened by the eunuchs in charge of the harem before entering the harem for a year of beauty treatments before being presented for an evening with the king. Yes, it's all there in chapter two!

So enters our heroine Esther who is a beautiful young Jewish woman, an orphan, brought up by her cousin Mordecai whose qualities pleased the eunuch in charge of the women, and so she enters the program without revealing her religion, and for a year is groomed with oil of myrrh, perfumes and cosmetics, for her night with the king. Now Esther was admired by all who saw her and when she was taken to the king, he loved her more than all the other women. She won his favour and devotion, so he placed the crown upon her head and gave a great banquet in her honour. So now the scene is set for the unfolding story of good versus evil, of timely coincidences and ultimately of redemption.

So we now know all the characters in our reading today except for Haman. He is the ultimate bad guy, a powerful advisor to the king and a man who takes against Mordecai who doesn't bow down to him and show appropriate obeisance to him in public. When he finds out he is a Jew, he plots to convince the king to kill all the Jews throughout the kingdom and a plan is enacted for this genocide on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

But unbeknownst to Haman, Mordecai has done the king a service by revealing a plot to kill him and this is recorded in the log of the king's actions. When the decree against the Jews is made known there is great mourning

amongst the Jewish people living in the kingdom. They are fasting, weeping and lamenting. When Esther hears it, she asks Mordecai why and finds out about the diabolical plan. He says to her “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” - perhaps hinting at providential circumstances. So Esther resolves to approach the king. She says “I will go to the king even though it is against the law and if I perish, I perish.” She also seems to be relying on providence.

So Esther enters the king’s court and he allows her to approach him and asks her what she wants. Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet that she has prepared for them. When they arrive and are drinking wine, the king again asks Esther what she wants. He even offers to give her half his kingdom. She merely replies that she wants them to come tomorrow for another banquet.

That night the king cannot sleep, so he asks if the record book can be brought to him and read allowed to send him to sleep!! The author of Esther certainly had a sense of humour! His people read to him the log of Mordacai saving the king from a plot to kill him. The king asks if he has been rewarded for this and they say “no”. At this moment, Haman enters the court to ask the king to hang Mordecai for not bowing to him (he has even set up the gallows outside his house) but before he can ask, the king asks him how he should reward someone whom he wishes to honour. Haman assumes he is talking about him, so suggests that he be robed with the kings robes, and be proclaimed across the city as person of honour. It’s beginning to sound like a Shakespearean comedy with everyone at cross purposes! When the king tells Haman that he wants to honour Mordecai, Haman is most unhappy but does as the king requests.

The next thing that happens is Esther’s second feast. Again as they were drinking wine, the king asks the queen what her petition is and this is where

our reading today picks up. So now Esther reveals that she and all her people will be killed by order of Haman and the king orders Haman to be hanged on the gallows that he had constructed for Mordecai! The irony is almost comedic. The story ends with Mordecai being elevated to the role of chief advisor and changing the orders to kill the Jews. The holiday that is instituted here is Purim, one of the most holy days in the Jewish calendar.

The book of Esther has everything, it's comedic, it's tragic. It's a story of survival and providence. It's a story that asks us about the role of coincidences in our lives. What if Esther hadn't been made queen? What if Mordecai hadn't heard about the plot against the King? What if the King hadn't had a sleepless night after the first banquet with Esther? What if the servant reading the record book hadn't read the entry about Mordecai?

All these elements of the story lead to the salvation of the Jews. So without mentioning God even once, the hand of God is in action throughout the story. Furthermore, Mordecai and Esther are clearly not religious devout Jewish people. They have assimilated into the Persian society to the point that Esther has no problem with marrying a gentile, something that is not part of the Law. God chooses to use as agents for good, flawed people like you and me.

It's also interesting to note that, in some ways, times haven't changed much since two centuries before Christ. We still have issues with sexism and racism in our world. Sexism in our own Australian corridors of power has been a big topic this year. Racism continues to dog Australia with indicators of indigenous health and wellbeing continuing to be significantly lower than broad population averages and migrant communities bearing the brunt of the recent Covid outbreak in the western suburbs of both Sydney and Melbourne. These speak into systemic problems that we have as a society.

So how do we respond to this story about Esther? How is the hand of God in action in your lives? Many years ago, when I was wondering about a particular set of circumstances, one of my Christian mentors told me that there is no such thing as coincidences, that God's hand is in everything. And when I look back on my own life, and see the threads that have drawn me into ministry, I can only wonder at God's providence. I think we are all agents of God's purposes. We are all called, in both big and small ways, to have an impact on the people and environment around us. God draws us in. Our job is to respond to God's call. To be that person that God has created us to be. To bring peace and love and grace to the situations that we each encounter. To perhaps change our world in the small way that we each are able.

What is your next step?

Shalom!