

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield Uniting Churches
27th of September, 2009

Esther

Psalm 124

Some parts of the Bible need to come with an “R” rating – they’re full of sex and violence, and are completely unsuitable for children. The *Book of Esther* is one of those parts.

Esther’s an unusual Biblical book. For one thing, it makes no mention of God at all. Despite being Jewish, it doesn’t mention the Law, covenant, prayer, or any of the dietary restrictions that distinguish Jews from the rest of the world. The early Jewish translators were so worried by this that they actually added prayers into the Greek version of the book. It took a while for *Esther* to be accepted as Scripture. The book was written sometime in the fourth century BC, but it didn’t become part of the Jewish canon until the third century AD. The Western Church decided that it was part of the Christian canon in the fourth century and the Eastern Church in the eighth century; which is why it’s part of our Bible in the twenty-first century, although Martin Luther for one wished that it had never been written.

The Lectionary gives us only one extract from the *Book of Esther* in the entire three year cycle, the reading that we heard today. That’s understandable; the *Book of Esther* is a strange tale. But it’s part of our Scriptures, and our understanding of the complexity of the Bible is limited if we ignore it. So, settle back, make yourself comfortable, here’s the story of Esther.

It begins with a drunken king. The Persian King Ahasuerus, known to history as Xerxes, holds a feast. While “merry with wine” he calls for his wife, Vashti, to appear before him to show off her beauty. She says, “No”. The king is outraged, and asks his sages what he should do. One of them answers: ‘Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands ... This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s behaviour will rebel against the king’s officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!’¹ So, for the sake of poor husbands everywhere, the king puts Vashti aside.

Then the king has all the beautiful young virgins in the land gathered in his harem. Among these is our heroine, known by the Jewish name Hadassah and the Persian name Esther. She’s an orphan, being brought up by her cousin, Mordecai. After a year of cosmetic treatments, Esther goes to the king. The king loves her more than anyone else and makes her his queen.

On Mordecai’s orders, Esther doesn’t tell anyone that they’re cousins or that she’s Jewish. Mordecai himself, sitting at the king’s gate, refuses to bow down to the king’s highest official, Haman. Haman is infuriated. He decides to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom.² He convinces the king to go along with this by saying: “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.”³ It’s the same sort of anti-Semitic rhetoric heard again and again throughout history: the Jews aren’t like us, they should be destroyed. The king agrees, and Haman writes an edict giving orders to destroy all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.⁴ Haman decides on the date by casting a lot, or *Pur*,

¹ Esther 1:16-19.

² Esther 3:5-6

³ Esther 3:8.

⁴ Esther 3:13.

hence the name Purim. After this, we're told: "The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion."⁵ This is not an edifying story!

Mordecai hears, and sends word to Esther, asking her to intervene with the king. Esther replies: 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live.'⁶ But Mordecai replies: '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.'⁷ Esther agrees to approach the king, and asks Mordecai to arrange for all the Jews to fast on her behalf for three days. 'After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.'⁸

Esther doesn't perish. When she approaches the king, he holds out his golden scepter to her and offers her anything she wants. She asks him and Haman to join her immediately at a banquet, which they do. While they're drinking wine, the king again asks Esther what she wants, and she asks that he and Haman return the next day for another banquet.

This all makes Haman very happy. But as he leaves the palace he sees Mordecai sitting at the gate, not bowing to him, and he's furious. He tells his wife and his friends, and they advise him to deal with his anger by building an enormous gallows on which to hang Mordecai. This is going to end badly!

Then we come to today's reading. The king and Haman join Esther at her banquet, the king asks Esther what she wants, and she replies: 'If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.'⁹ The king, apparently forgetting the decree he allowed Haman to make, asks who has presumed to do this, and Esther replies: 'A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!'¹⁰ And Haman ends up hanged on the very gallows that he'd prepared for Mordecai.

But what else can the king do? The edict has been made, the Persians have been told that they can kill all the Jews, and that can't be revoked. So the king allows Esther to make another edict, by which the Jews are allowed to defend themselves against any armed force attacking them. The *Book of Esther* says: 'the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people. They killed ... the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; but they did not touch the plunder.'¹¹ As well as the 500 people in the citadel of Susa, the Jews kill 300 people in Susa itself and 75,000 people throughout the rest of the king's provinces. To celebrate this slaughter of their enemies, Mordecai wrote to the Jews telling them to keep these days as a holiday, days of feasting and gladness, sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. And the Feast of Purim is born.

It's important to remember as we read it that *Esther* isn't a work of history; it's a historical novel. One of its purposes is obviously to explain why the Jews celebrate Purim, which was probably originally a Persian or Babylonian holiday. But its other messages are open to debate. What exactly is this story meant to be telling us?

⁵ Esther 3:15.

⁶ Esther 4:11.

⁷ Esther 4:13-14.

⁸ Esther 4:16.

⁹ Esther 7:3-4.

¹⁰ Esther 7:5.

¹¹ Esther 9:5-9.

The characters in the story aren't meant to be taken seriously. The king is a buffoon; the whole story starts because he gets drunk. It's hard to believe that the villain, Haman, didn't know that his new queen was related to Mordecai, the man he was trying to destroy, with all the messages that go between Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai precipitates the crisis because he refuses to bow to Haman. In the Greek additions to the story this refusal is given a noble reason. Mordecai says that it was because he didn't want to put the glory of man before the glory of God. But in the original no reason is given; Mordecai just seems to be behaving badly. Esther's a more positive character, who saves her people, but she seems to have no objections to becoming part of the Persian king's harem, and she doesn't seem to follow any Jewish religious rites. None of these characters are necessarily to be taken as role models.

If Esther *is* a role model, it might be as an example of courage and divine disobedience. The story starts because Vashti refuses to obey the king; Esther becomes queen partly because she is obedient where Vashti was disobedient. But when her life and the lives of her people are at stake, Esther breaks the law, even though it might mean her death. One message of the *Book of Esther* might be that when the law supports oppression, when the law is used to kill the innocent, the faithful response is to break the law. In such situations, as in Nazi Germany, obeying the law is wrong.

Another way of reading the *Book of Esther* as scripture might be to read it together with today's psalm, Psalm 124. There's no mention of God in the entire *Book of Esther*. It's Esther who, with the advice of Mordecai, saves the Jews. In contrast, today's psalm says: 'If it had not been the Lord who was on our side —let Israel now say— if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us.'¹²

If we read the *Book of Esther* and Psalm 124 together, we are given a balance between a human response to injustice and oppression, and trust in the Lord. It's Esther's intelligence and courage that saves her people, but the Jews are saved at the cost of 75,800 lives. Purim celebrates a great victory – but one in which thousands and thousands of people died. Human intelligence and courage can lead people into ethically difficult situations. On the other hand, Psalm 124 encourages us to trust in God; but if Mordecai and Esther had trusted in God while doing nothing themselves, they and all their people would probably have been slaughtered. A trust in God that refuses to recognize human responsibility is as questionable as humans seeking justice and peace without reference to God. God and humanity are partners in seeking the good of this world. Reading *Esther* and Psalm 124 together gives us a message that neither can give alone.

One writer I read this week describes *Esther* as a story in which 'unsubtle villains meet with brutal fates; proud partisans are fully vindicated; lovely heroines retain the affection of all; and stolid, dim-witted monarchs are there to be used by all'.¹³ It's a fairytale. But it's also Scripture, and so contains words to us from God. *Esther* is a fascinating, complicated and fun book, and I heartily recommend that you read it.

¹² Psalm 124:1-5.

¹³ Jack M. Sasson, 'Esther,' in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (ed.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, (London: Fontana, 1987), p. 341.