

Sermon for Sunday July 14th 2019

Sermon series on Esther

Esther 1:1-15 and 10-20 and Luke 12: 13-21

‘Watch out, be on you guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist of an abundance of possessions.’

It’s a shame King Xerxes hadn’t got someone to give him this advice. Instead he was very much of the take life easy - eat drink and be merry persuasion, and his life seems to consist of acquiring possessions, including wives.

We begin today our summer series on the book of Esther. It’s a very dramatic story with larger than life characters. It tells of how a young Jewish girl Esther saves her people from annihilation by king Xerxes, and his evil henchman Haman. It is the basis of the Jewish spring festival of Purim and is retold each year during the festival with much noise and celebration.

So today an introduction to the story, a bit of background and some things to think about as we listen to this ancient story.

The story

It is set in the time of the Persian Empire in the 5th century BC. The Jewish nation had been defeated by the Babylonians and many carried off into captivity and exile. In time the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and under their more benign rule, the Jews who wanted to, were allowed to return to Israel and to rebuild Jerusalem. Many however had made new homes for themselves in exile and stayed on. They lived as a small religious and ethnic minority among the various nations ruled by the Persians. Perhaps that’s one reason this story has always been so popular with the Jewish people – it speaks of an endangered minority, a situation many of them knew well for the next two thousand years.

Our story opens in Susa – the winter capital of the Persian Empire. We have yet to meet the main Jewish characters Esther and her uncle/cousin Mordecai. They appear next week. This week we are introduced to the Persian king, Xerxes, also known sometimes as Ahasuerus; his current queen Vashti, and his advisors. Xerxes was king of one of the largest empires the world had ever seen, stretching from present day

Turkey and Libya to India. He throws the world's longest party, lasting 6 months, to show off his wealth and status to all the nobles and smaller kings he rules over. It culminates with a banquet – seven days of eating and drinking to excess- and on the seventh day he sends for his queen to parade her before his guests. He is 'high in spirits from wine' – in other words extremely drunk. And it was a bad decision.

Women in the royal court lived in seclusion in the harem, separate from the men. Xerxes would have had hundreds of wives and concubines. They would never have attended a feast of this kind or been paraded in front of the male guests. The only women attending an event like this would have been those there to provide 'entertainment' and 'services' of various kinds for the men. Understandably his queen Vashti refuses to obey her drunken husband. It was a brave decision. Women had no rights. Vashti – for all that she was queen and so probably lived very comfortably –was the property of her husband, effectively a slave. She had no right to refuse him anything. And she risked her life doing so. She may have hoped that her drunken husband would remember nothing about it the following morning, but

alas he consults his advisors and they tell him that allowing Vashti to get away with this will not just make him look foolish, but will threaten all the husbands of the country. What on earth would happen to society if wives started saying no to their husbands!

So this episode ends with Vashti being dismissed. Was she just demoted or was she killed – we don't know. After all she is only a woman and a pagan so she wasn't considered important to those who first told the story. But it opens up a vacancy for a new queen and the search for a replacement begins and that is where Esther comes in.

The story that unfolds from here has many of the elements of a fairy tale. There is the poor but beautiful girl raised from obscurity to marry the king – although this is no prince charming; then there is the faithful friend/relative character who watches over her from afar - Mordecai her cousin or maybe uncle; and then the bad guy, the evil Haman, one of the king's officials who is jealous of Mordecai and devises a plot to kill all the Jews; and of course the foolish king who is easily manipulated by those around him. By

the end of the story good triumphs over evil, (or at least the Jews win) Haman is killed, and Esther, Mordecai and her people live to celebrate and throw their own party – the origin of the feast of Purim.

So much does it resemble a folk tale that some experts think that it probably is - a kind of early historical fiction. Whether Esther and Mordecai and Haman were actual historical figures we will never know, but the story is what matters, and the place it has played in Jewish consciousness over the centuries.

Problems.

There are a number of difficulties/issues with the story of Esther that I think we should be aware of as we read it. Some have long been recognised, some are a more modern problem. The first is to do with what is **not** in the story...

God is never mentioned. Neither are Jewish beliefs about God, nor prayer or worship, though fasting is. Esther and Mordecai are Jews and behave as they do because of that, but their faith is never explained or God referenced. Many Jewish scholars felt even up to the early centuries AD that it was not religious enough

to be included in their scriptures. The story of Esther had to fight for its place in the Jewish canon. In the Jewish bible it is put not with the history books as it is in our bibles but with the writings - the books or poetry and prose, like the psalms and the song of songs. There were several versions of the story circulating so that in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, compiled in the first century BC, an extra 107 verses appear in addition to those in the older Hebrew version. The church fathers putting the Christian bible together decided variously to include the extra verses or to take them out and put them in the apocrypha. Some wanted to leave the whole book out. But in the end it was included and so we too can read about Esther and Mordecai. It is a bit of a challenge to discover what we can learn from it about God, and living the Christian life, but it is part of our scriptures and I'm looking forward to the different ways our various preachers explore it over the next few weeks.

The second area of difficulty is to do with what **is** in the story and especially the assumptions that underlie it. At a simple level we could enjoy the defeat of the evil Haman by the cunning of the beautiful Esther, and

it does have that wonderful line when Mordecai advises her – ‘maybe you have come to your royal position for just such a time as this’ but there are elements that make me very uncomfortable.

Forgiveness and mercy are absent from the story. There are some pretty barbaric impalings and the Jews celebrate their deliverance from death by massacring the Persians in their thousands, which I think makes them little better than the pagans, and sits very uncomfortably with our Christian faith.

And while I think we are supposed to be pleased that the heroine Esther wins her place as queen because of her great beauty– she is in reality a sex slave. Today we would say she had been trafficked. Taken from her home, imprisoned in the harem, and groomed to take her place in the king’s bed. She has no say in the matter, no rights, no choice. I don’t find that an edifying or inspiring part of the story. Nor do I find the assumption that women should obey their husbands very palatable.

We can’t know what the original hearers made of it. One suspects that was just not a concern for them as women were regarded as the property of men for

thousands of years and had no rights over their own bodies. And of course that is still the case in parts of our world today. We can admire Esther’s and Vashti’s courage, and Esther’s loyalty to her people, but I don’t think we should ignore the sexism, the racism, and barbaric cruelty which permeate the story.

Vashti

Returning to today’s episode, the story of Vashti’s rebellious behaviour - what can we take from it for us today? Not I think that women should obey their husbands! Was that the message the writer hoped to convey? Or was it said tongue in cheek? I think we always need to be aware when we read the bible that not everything in it is meant for us to copy or emulate. Xerxes, Haman, and the rest are there as an example of the foolishness of greedy men who seek power at any cost and use their power cruelly and unjustly. I do wonder if over the centuries the Jewish women listening to this read at Purim chuckled and muttered ‘in your dreams’. Thankfully today we no longer live in a society where women have to obey their husbands and have no more rights than slaves. Though it has

taken us a very long time to get here – some of it within the last hundred years.

So perhaps we can recognise the courage of Vashti who, in spite of being queen, had no power over her own body, like many people in today's world, and yet has the courage to say no to a tyrant and a drunken fool. Sometimes the only power the powerless have is to refuse to comply, to say no to what they believe is wrong. Christians have a long and honourable history of resistance to governments that are abusing their power, or passing laws that go against our beliefs. Whether it's writing letters, joining a protest march, or taking practical action - what are the causes where you would want to say 'as Christian I cannot go along with this', and 'this is where I say no'?

And let's applaud the women in this story who take their stand against the powerful and corrupt men, refuse to obey the tyrants, and risk their lives doing so.