

Sermon on Esther

Esther 2) Living Inside God's Imagination

'Faith is an imaginative enterprise in which I must first of all give up the notion that I know what I am looking at when I look at the world.'

In the imaginative act, we are grasped whole. Revelation is not a matter of thinking or feeling, intuiting or sensing, working from the left side of the brain to the right.

It is a shocking gift of new sight that obliterates such distinctions, grabbing us by our lapels and turning us around, so that when we are set back down again we see everything from a new angle.' (BB Taylor)

Faith is an imaginative enterprise.

And the first thing we do is give up the notion that we know what we are looking at when we look at the world.

Faith gives us a new lens through which to look, and a new reality in which to live...

...if we can learn to live inside God's imagination, rather than other competing attractions.

Living in this world it can be easy to assume that what we're told by the media or our politicians, or the pervasiveness of capitalism is the truth of things.

This is the way of things and you either live up to these assumptions or you get left behind.

Yet in faith we see the truth differently.

The Kingdom of God is not of this world, as Jesus says.

It's not of the ways of this world, however attractive they may seem.

Jesus is the Messiah, the one who will save us.

The one with power and authority.

So if Jesus came to Sydney, we'd expect him to go straight to Macquarie Street.

It's where power is exercised, it's the seat of authority.

It's where deals are made.

Yet I'm fairly certain that's not where Jesus would go.

I think we'd find him in the back blocks of Waterloo, or Redfern, or Kings Cross.

I think we'd find him among the poor telling them they are children of God and blessed, not society's cast offs as the rest of the world might imagine.

God's imagination is different and the Bible pictures for us exactly what it looks like.

Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn, orphans, the seekers after righteousness.

Welcome the stranger, the homeless, the refugee.

And it is for us to imagine ourselves and others in this way and let all the rest flow from that.

Faith is the shocking new way of seeing and knowing that lets us do this.

Faith is how we live inside God's imagination.

In this way, communion, for instance, is not something we merely do once a month to fulfill religious righteousness.

It's not just a pleasant ritual where we say a few nice sounding words and then have some bread and wine.

All a little ho hum and routine.

It's not a pietistical encumbrance, a kind of religious housekeeping that means our spiritual balance is topped up until next time.

Communion is the celebratory meal of Jesus, of remembrance, of thanksgiving, and of future hope, that we share together as the family of faith.

It's us becoming what we are receiving the body of Christ.

Everybody eats, everybody shares, it's the great heavenly banquet of faith shared together in our common time.

It binds us together, we're all equal in the sight of God, and no-one is excluded or left behind.

It's a glimpse of heaven where all are fed and all are welcomed.

This is the truth of it and in this way it is God's divine imaginative vision which declares the power of the Kingdom.

A power forged in God's own self giving in Jesus' death and resurrection which sits at the heart of our faith.

We live and participate in that divine truth every time we share communion together.

We act in faith believing that it is the truth, as opposed to any other particular way of seeing or imagining.

We imagine that there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free, for all are one in Christ at this holy meal.

We imagine that power is forged in the weakness of self giving and humility, not force, violence, and power politics.

Modern Christian writers have recognised that acts as simple as keeping the Sabbath are a reflection of living inside God's imagination.

Walter Brueggemann wrote a book called 'Sabbath as Resistance'

Keeping the Sabbath is pictured as resistance to the 24 hour consumerist imagination of our capitalist society.

Spending some time not spending is good for our souls.

Taking time to be still, to consider our inner lives, to reflect on God's love, to resolve that what defines us is our relationship with Jesus, not what and how we consume.

I remember Sundays from my childhood clearly in that respect.

Even as young children we were expected to understand that Sunday was a quiet day where there was no television, no sport, no spending of money.

It was a day of worship and rest.

Many of you I'm sure... I'm sure... would remember the Eric Liddell story from the movie Chariots of Fire.

Even the lure of Olympic glory was not going to sway him from God's imperative to keep the Sabbath Holy.

Some might see such actions as moralising or pious posturing, yet for Liddell it was his personal way in that moment of living inside God's imagination.

Of living out of God's paradigm of what was true and real.

In this second sermon on the book of Esther, we find Esther, the Jewish queen to the Gentile Persian King, faced with a decision.

And it's a decision about what truth she lives out of, which imaginative vision defines her.

Modercai her cousin, sees her elevation to the position of Queen as a providential ascent which gives her the power to try to help her now condemned people.

Perhaps she has the power to change the king's mind, to release her people from under the pain of death, and to see them able to prosper once more.

Yet she is nervous.

It is an act punishable by death to appear before the King uninvited.

She wavers, knowing the danger, but finally resolves: '... I will go to the king, even though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.'

She faces the challenge of holding to her identity amidst a difficult and complex context in which it would be far easier to keep silent, let things be, don't make a fuss.

She breaks the law to do the right thing.

And had she taken that easier route, she would have acceded to the prevailing paradigm.

It is made an even more admirable act given that she is a woman in a patriarchal world.

It is an act of resistance and courage on any number of levels and subverts the given social and religious assumptions of her day.

For the writer of Esther, it is this solidarity with her people, God's people, that commends her story as one to remember.

And indeed the entire story of Esther is read every year on the Jewish festival of Purim.

It's a story of what it means to be Jewish, to hold to that way of being, and live within that imaginative vision even in very difficult times.

Because for Christians it is through Jesus we see what God's truth is all about, living inside God's imagination means being bound to Jesus in all things.

As BB Taylor said, faith means giving up the notion that we know what we're looking at when we look at the world.

In the light of Esther's own personal struggle to imagine how she is to be in her context, today we reflect a little on how faith changes how we see ourselves.

How living inside God's imagination means seeing a different image of ourselves, as well as the world around us.

Esther ultimately sees who she is, who she is called to be, and lives into it, even at the risk of death – if I perish, I perish.

We forget sometimes that the commandment doesn't say, 'love your neighbour and despise yourself.', rather it says love your neighbour *as* yourself.

We rightly give a lot of attention to what it means to love others, but a faith filled vision of what it means to love ourselves, to see ourselves as God sees us, is something we less often consider.

My hunch is that this is because we worry that any talk of loving ourselves might seem arrogant or egotistical.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In God's truth, as in all things, we are to look at ourselves as God looks on us.

The love we are called to have for ourselves is grounded in God's own love for us.

So it's actually unfaithful not to love ourselves as God does.

It's a sign of our sinful inclinations.

Faithfulness before God is not found in a self conscious false humility, nor in an overly critical self loathing, each of which are a denial of God.

Loving ourselves means seeing that we are made for relationship with God and given lives and gifts to be used faithfully in his service, whatever context we find ourselves in.

It's about believing that divine beauty and truth and grace and joy can shine through us like light refracted through a prism.

That we can shine that light every single day of our lives.

And remembering that this is in order to give God glory and so not something we should shy away from or downplay.

CS Lewis once said that humility means enjoying your own gifts as though they were someone elses.

So much of our world today fluctuates between two extremes which are both equally untrue visions of who we are.

The cult of personality says it's about what I want.

(one look at the US election coverage is all you need in this regard...)

It's a personal preference and as long as I'm choosing, then it's true and legitimate.

This is a sophisticated way of saying self centredness.

At the other end is the cult of association.

I'm defined by who my friends are, by what others think of me or say about me.

I'm tainted or honoured by the opinions of the mob and my life has meaning only insofar as others flatter me.

This is a sophisticated way of saying lack of self worth.

So often we operate out of one of these distorted versions of ourselves, rather than the image of God in which we are made.

We struggle to forgive ourselves even as we're told every week in worship that our sins are forgiven.

God is not crossing his fingers as this assurance is made.

Being faithful means seeing ourselves differently.

We only see ourselves rightly when we see as God sees, when we live inside God's imagination of who we are... beloved, cherished, gifted, human creatures who are made to be in relationship with our creator.

And as we see all through the Gospels, this is very different to how the world often sees.

Esther questions herself initially, but comes to see her purpose, herself in wider terms.

In a bigger frame.

She becomes the heroine of the story by her willingness to see herself in a different way, and live out of that alternate vision.

Loving yourself faithfully not only allows you to love your neighbours, but it is a reflection of your love for God.

It's a central part of living inside God's imagination.

Of living out of the truth of Jesus rather than some other paradigm.

We had a friend at my home church at Richmond who had lost her husband to cancer at quite a young age.

She had known a very happy marriage and there was not a day that went by when she didn't feel the pinch of grief.

She had a deep faith and was always serving others, especially through pastoral care with which she had a wonderful gift.

Her ministry grew out of her grief and her own experience drew her to love others with a deep compassion.

She never closed herself off.

Never used her grief as a pretence for isolation.

As hard as she found getting up every day alone, in faith she ventured out believing she had a role to play and a life to share in God's Kingdom – which she did.

Over the years we were there and beyond she ministered to many people who were dying or suffering, struggling or heartbroken.

Living inside God's imagination for her was always about seeing herself rightly as a child of God and knowing that in her suffering, her suffering Lord drew close...

So, as a reflection of that great love for her she sought to be close to others.

She loved herself enough to know her life was a gift to be offered, even in the midst of great pain.

Her life is a witness to me and to us of what it means to see ourselves as God sees us.

To live out of God's Kingdom vision rather than anything else.

Like Esther, she set her life within God's imagination and saw herself in those terms which allowed her to love others with the same freedom and empathy.

There's not a single person in this church today without that same capacity.

We are each made to be in relationship with our creator, and by faith we can reach out our hands and touch the very face of God.

Love God, and love your neighbour... as yourself.

Live inside God's living, loving, forgiving, compassionate, and holy imagination.

And you will find freedom.

In Jesus' name. Amen.