

Sermon on Esther Esther 3)

Esther is in the end a story of Jewish deliverance in a threatening world.

It's a story of reversals and the turning of tables.

And like in all such stories we find ourselves rooting for the underdog.

And we get that same sense of satisfied delight when the villains get their just deserts.

Haman is impaled on his own gallows, set up ostentatiously at his home so he could watch Mordercai perish.

Pride goes before the fall as the old proverb says.

The Jews, this scattered and endangered minority in a strange land are rescued out of danger and we, the readers, are supposed to feel good as a consequence.

This is how the story works on us and why it is remembered every year at the Jewish festival of Purim.

The fact that God is not mentioned in the whole book doesn't remove the abiding sense that this great triumph is of God and reinforces the covenant relationship established long ago between God and his people.

God does not leave the Hebrews bereft.

Salvation is at hand.

Winners are grinners as the old saying goes and as we're told in chapter 9, for the Jews their sorrow was turned to joy and their mourning into celebration.

Esther is a story about triumph in adversity.

Reading Esther through Christian lenses, as we have done over the past few weeks, though, presents any number of dilemmas.

In so many ways the story seems at odds with core Christian understandings.

Read in the light of the cross there are tensions and ambiguities which emerge that challenge us to think deeply about our own faith and commitments.

The great themes of deliverance and rescue so prevalent in Esther are for Christians reconfigured in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Salvation through Jesus' death doesn't involve the destruction of our enemies, but rather God's destruction of the final enemy, death.

God's final edict says the way you are saved is to be so immersed in love that fear, and apathy, and hate, and the things that tear us apart from each other and from God can no longer prosper.

A new way is born – a stream in the desert, a light in the darkness, a star in the sky that brings hope.

As it is in Jesus that God forges the alternative way of love which leads to abundant life, so it is in being bound to Jesus in faith that we receive salvation.

In Jesus we see ourselves – he is a man – and we see God – he is his heavenly Father's Son.

In his death he shows he is with us in the deepest sorrow and pain of our experience.

And in his resurrection he shows God has not left us in death, but rather will transform us by bringing us through death to new life.

Esther delivers her people for a time.

But they will face further challenges and struggles.

It is a limited deliverance, not unlike how Jesus' raising of Lazarus is limited.

Lazarus' recovery is a sign of God's ultimate power for sure, but he will eventually die again, just as the Jews will face struggle again.

Jesus delivers his people in death and resurrection for ever so that in him nothing can separate us from the love of God.

There is a provisionality to Esther's victory, yet Jesus' victory is eternal.

If you think back through your life there will have been formative experiences which have made you the person you are.

Formative stories which have shaped you.

Families obviously play a big role, perhaps employment situations, friendships.

Perhaps experiences of great loss or struggle.

I remember clearly at my grandfather's funeral an aunt of mine visiting her three year old daughter's grave who had been lost in tragic circumstances.

And simply weeping gently and repeating over and over, it's not fair.

It was a formative part of her life and always would be, just as the long and fruitful life of her loving father had been.

And somehow those two experiences found a telling confluence in memory and sorrow, as well as thanksgiving that day.

She was who she was in part because of that experience.

And so derivatively for me as I watched her weep and knew why and felt the expression of something so clear and deep without words.

Beyond words.

For each of us I imagine there will be such times, of joy and sorrow through which we have come to be who we are.

And whether it has always felt like it or not, God's love has been constant throughout.

Being a people of faith says that above all our formative stories sits *the story of God's love in Jesus.*

It is the wider story in which we interpret everything else.

In which we are finally made who we really are.

It frames how we understand and adapt to everything we experience.

And the sorrow of great loss and the flooding tears is a context in which God's working is most poignantly active.

For in that moment it says, there is still hope.

As hard as this is, there is still hope.

For the Jews that is a function of the story of Esther.

As it is remembered and re-read every year so it provides them with hope in the present. It re-tells the current situation in the light of God's fidelity in the past.

It invokes memory and history and divinity all at the same time.

For Christians it points to Jesus.

In its own obscure and ambiguous way it helps us to see God's final and forever formative story of hope.

And while Jesus reconfigures our understanding of God's deliverance, Esther gestures in the same direction by prompting us to look more earnestly into the heart of our faith.

And to see more clearly the framing presence of God throughout our lives.

One of the hardest things for any of us to grapple with is that God won't just make things better.

Faith is not a get out of jail free card.

Sometimes it will be in wading through sorrow, even, perhaps especially, in going to death faithfully that we will live out of God's formative story.

We all hope to live long and fruitful lives, yet some of the great saints of the church, those whom we most remember and cherish died young.

Teresa of Liseux died in her mid 20s, yet her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul* has become a spiritual classic influencing millions ever since it was published.

Teresa of Liseux or Esther may be pretty hard models to live up to.

But the point of reading Esther's story is not to imagine our witness needs to look exactly like hers, but rather that her example encourages us to be faithful in our own context and leave the consequences up to God.

Deliverance, rescue, salvation, after all this is God's work, our role is to be faithful in who we are and where we're placed.

Every day we meet people, engage in society in different ways, meet challenges which pose questions to us.

Who will I be in this moment in this situation?

And in every moment we're charged with deciding which story it is we live out of.

The trick is not to imagine we won't have questions or confusions.

Esther struggled to know what the right thing was to do.

No, the trick is to return to God always and listen once more to the story the Bible tells us of his great and enduring love.

To be framed by that story and to carry on in faith.

To live our lives day to day and follow after Jesus.

God's deliverance and rescue is always at hand and we begin to see how it is forming us as we learn to give ourselves away for others.

Like Esther to be willing to see what it means to honour God where we are and through faith to live in God's story of salvation.

It is indeed a deep calling, yet from the beginning fishermen, farmers, tax collectors, lawyers, traders... ordinary people like us have walked the road of faith with grace and compassion, and thereby turned their walk into a witness.

And we too can do the same.

In Jesus' name. Amen.