

Sermon on Esther

Esther 1) The Scattered People of Faith and the Scattered Faith of People

So, in approaching the book of Esther we are entering into a thoroughly Jewish narrative.

Esther is a story about the Jewish people written for the Jewish people.

This provides an immediate problem for us who seek to read Esther from a Christian point of view.

We are a people of Jesus, those who believe in his Lordship over all.

We believe all of Scripture points to Jesus as God's unique revelation of love and that if we're listening faithfully we will hear God's living voice speaking.

Yet the writer of Esther knew nothing of Jesus and so we have a dilemma.

This is of course an issue with any part of the Old Testament, but in Esther it is especially pronounced.

Apart from being a very Hebrew-centric story, Esther famously makes no mention of God at all.

None.

You can scour the text for clues but the one actor we believe is at the heart of the Bible's story is strangely absent.

More than this, though, it's a peculiarly un-religious text in general.

There's no talk of prayer, the Temple, Jerusalem, sacrifice, all things which abound in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures and really very little piety at all.

The closest it comes are some passing references to fasting, but that's about it.

So apart from the cultural and religious dissonance from our Christian context, the text itself is what we today would describe as secular.

It seems more like a story about power politics than faith and spirituality; a tale of court intrigue and personality, of goodies and baddies, almost Shakespearean in tone.

It's an unlikely text in which to hear the living voice of God in every way.

Martin Luther seriously questioned its place in the Bible, and when I told one of my ministry friends I was doing a four week series on Esther his response was, 'Better you than me.'

Yet there is more here than meets the eye if we're willing to watch and wait.

More that may inform our faith than we might first imagine.

And while this will never be anything other than a fundamentally Jewish story, listen with faithful hearts and we may well hear the whisper of Christ calling us into God's way of love as well.

So, today as we commence this series we're going to begin with the overarching theme of the book of Esther.

The meta-narrative as it were, the crux of the matter.

Framed as a question it goes something like this:

How does a people of faith remain faithful when they are scattered in a foreign land?

How is one's faithful identity maintained in complex and pressurising environments?

Can faithfulness incorporate compromise in difficult situations, and if so how?

In Esther the Jewish people are scattered throughout the Persian Empire.

They are a people on the margins.

They are the religious 'other', a religious minority in a wider dominant culture.

Esther herself personifies the place of her people as a whole.

Chosen from obscurity to become the queen to the Persian King, Esther becomes herself the religious 'other' in the King's palace.

The Persian King has made a foreigner his queen.

As soon as this narrative turn happens, we are aware that the tension of identity and faith is being ratcheted up.

Like the people as a whole, we wonder how Esther's Jewishness will become a factor in the highest court in this Gentile empire.

She is now the queen putting her in an incredibly powerful position, but how will her Jewish faith and identity be received and considered?

How will it affect the story and its outcomes?

And how will she maintain her faith in this surprising and challenging situation?

Importantly, we learn that in the first place Esther did not reveal her Jewish identity.

She is undercover, as it were, a fact that will shift the story later on.

These questions of faith and identity are germane to the other key Jewish character in the story Mordecai, Esther's uncle.

Unlike Esther, Mordecai's Jewish identity is public knowledge and when he refuses to bow down to Haman, the King's head official, he sets in train the events that dominate the narrative.

Haman is enraged at Mordecai's defiance and decides to punish all the Jews for the supposed sin of the one.

Through a well crafted plan hatched at Mordecai's advice, having kept her identity secret at the start, Esther gains the approval of the king at not some small danger to herself, reveals who she is, and pleads for the king to save her people.

The King, having promised to give her whatever she asks, accedes to the request and the Jews are saved from Haman's diabolical plot.

In a supreme irony, Haman meets his demise on the very gallows he had erected to do away with Mordecai – just outside his own house what's more.

The closest the book comes to any reference to God or providence is in chapter 4 when Mordecai speculates that perhaps Esther's rise to power was in order that she could make a difference at this very threatening hour for her people.

So there's quite a contrast between Esther's initial silence about her identity and Mordecai's very open identification, both of which play a role in the unfolding story.

They are crucial narrative ploys, but they pose the wider question we consider today about living out faith as part of a minority in a wider dominant culture.

Now while obviously it would be a mistake to draw a direct comparison with our current context and the place of the Christian faith, the question is perhaps not as far removed as we may first think.

Stanley Hauerwas, the American theologian has spent his career trying to convince the church in America that it is under a misapprehension.

The church, he says, has been lulled into a false sense of security in the wake of Christendom.

Because for roughly 1500 years the church and the state were tightly intertwined Christians got used to thinking they were roughly the same thing when they're not.

Over the past 70 years or so these two things once joined at the hip have slowly started to pull apart.

Christendom is over and the church has been dislocated from its position of political power.

Yet the distinction between the wider culture and the faith remains a subtle one in lots of respects.

There's kind of this Christian residue on everything which can make it hard to remember the church and the state are not the same thing.

The truth is that the church now exists as a religious minority in a secular world, a world in which people are more likely walk past the door in a state of indifference than spit on it in definite opposition.

Hauerwas' critique of the church in America is that it has confused being a citizen of the state and being a citizen of heaven.

Too much of the church, he believes, thinks being a good American is equivalent to being a good Christian and vice versa...

...where in actual fact that very confusion puts the church in great danger of all kinds of idolatries, not least an adherence to the assumptions of capitalism and military might which are antithetical to the Gospel.

It's a telling critique, especially as it has been the confusion of faith with nationalism or patriotism that has been one of the church's gravest errors over its history, exemplified

in the WWI trenches as Christian countries at war believed the same God was on their side in the fight.

And yet it is subtle.

As we see with Esther who, unlike Mordecai, didn't defiantly publicise her faith and religious identity, sometimes the choices are not black and white with a clear right and wrong.

The church honours the Bonhoeffers and MLKs who took a stand against direct hostility or injustice and were martyred as a result, but for most of us the challenge will not generally, if ever, be this dire.

And sometimes taking a quieter more moderate approach is what's required.

Most of the time in a place like Australia there will not be a conflict between being Australian and being Christian.

There's a lot of overlap in ethical expectations for instance, and for the most part the state doesn't stand in the way of Christians professing and acting on what they believe.

But this creates its own dangers from a faith point of view – Hauerwas's false sense of security.

The temptation, as Hauerwas warns, is to become complacent, to lose our cutting edge and morph into the wider society, and so when a dilemma of faith does arise, we default to the state instead of standing for Christ.

Esther is concerned for her safety when Mordecai implores her to use her position to plead for her people.

Yet this is a point where she does need to stand up and of course she does and her people are saved.

On the flip side it is Mordecai's decision not to bow to Haman that creates the problem in the first place... perhaps it could be argued that this was a prideful gesture where compromise could have been sought without sacrificing religious identity?

In little ways we may well find that this same dilemma arises for us day by day in our own lives?

It remains the case that what is required is a careful reading of the context and a Christian wisdom that is discerning about how and when to act.

There are many layers of complexity here and no one situation will be the same as all the rest.

To take a simple personal example, the phrase ‘for Christ’s sake’, one we often use in church to end prayers or as part of the liturgy, is, as we know in a secular place like Australia, often used as a way of cursing.

One need only watch television or go to the football and within half an hour you’re likely to hear it or one of its variants.

Now if you’re anything like me, every time I hear it there’s a little part of me inside that pangs at hearing our Lord’s name taken in vain like this.

Yet I rarely if ever stop and make a point of saying to someone, excuse me I find your use of that phrase difficult or offensive.

In that moment I keep my identity as a Christian secret.

I’m not here making a case for what any of us should do in that or similar situations, I’m just highlighting how regularly in even small ways, this question raised by the book of Esther becomes our question too.

Perhaps I should say something more often.

The added complexity of Esther is that she colludes with worldly power to see her people saved.

She leverages off her personal religious identity to influence the king of the empire.

For many years now the church has worked with and alongside governments in the delivery of social services, in the military, and in other ways which have clearly benefitted the wider society.

But again, that decision creates complexities in terms of the church’s belief and practice, complexities that need navigating at different levels every single day and in which the same kind of wisdom and discernment is required.

Of course one of the central ways Christians retain and name their identity publicly is by being at worship week to week.

And indeed in the story of the Hebrews in the OT the practices of worship and prayer are key factors in the maintaining of their religious identity, which makes it all the more remarkable that they are completely missing from Esther.

Yet for us, worship is still at the heart of how we say together who we are as a people of faith.

As we come to worship God we profess a truth higher than the state, higher than the worldly powers, that we say has deeper relevance for us and the world than any passing empire has, does, or will.

Today more and more people who claim Christian faith eschew worship.

We can be Christian on our own they say.

Yet this is a line the church has never, and should never be willing to cross.

Worship is fundamental to our Christian identity and should never be marginalised in our practice. (and this is not just my way of trying to get people through the door on a Sunday).

So, as we finish our first instalment on Esther, the question of who we are in faith and how we live it in a wider dominant culture is to the fore.

We do well to remember that Jesus came to a hostile context and in the end died to show us who God is and what love is really all about.

Whatever decisions we make along the way, and we won't always get them right, while we remain in Christ and he in us, we will remain in the way of God.

This is in the end the heart of our faith, our life, and all of who we are.

In Jesus' name. Amen.