

Message for September 26, 2021

Esther 7:1-6

Once upon a time there was a king who was the ruler of the mighty Persian Empire; his name was Ahasuerus or, as some translations of the Bible call him, Xerxes. Xerxes seemingly had it all since he was one of the richest and most powerful men in the entire world! Despite all of his wealth and power though, Xerxes was lonely. He had been married but the relationship had not lasted. Feeling sorry for him, one of his advisors suggested that the king ought to remarry and should in fact have a contest to find a new wife. The empire was divided into 127 provinces and the advisor suggested that each province should send him its most beautiful representative. The king could choose the most beautiful of the 127 women to be his new bride. The king decided that this was a great idea and so it was ordered that this be done.

As it happened, the most beautiful maiden in the kingdom was a young Jewish girl named Esther. Esther had been orphaned at a very young age and had been adopted by an older cousin named Mordecai. Mordecai was a junior official at the royal court, and he encouraged Esther to enter the contest. What did she have to lose? Why this could be her ticket to the good life! The one thing that Mordecai warned her not to do however was let the king know that she was Jewish. Even back then anti-Semitism was alive and well. Despite being the shy young woman that she was, Esther entered the contest and to no one's surprise, except possibly her own, she won! The king took one look at her and the other 126 contestants may as well not existed. In no time at all Xerxes and Esther were married but did they live happily ever after?

As I have already mentioned, Mordecai was a junior official at the royal court and he offended the Grand Vizier, a man named Haman. Since he was the Grand Vizier, Haman thought that everyone should defer to him but Mordecai refused to do so. To make matters even worse, Mordecai was Jewish and Haman was, to put it mildly, very anti-Semitic. Indeed such was the depth of Haman's hatred for God's people that his great ambition in life was to wipe out the entire Jewish race. Haman succeeded in convincing the king that the Jews were a threat to national security and had to be done away with. As a further incentive to convince the king to go along with his plan, Haman also offered the king the equivalent of eighteen million dollars as a bribe. The king

fell for this, and orders were sent to all of the provincial governors stating that on a certain day all the Jews in the empire were to be put to death.

This plan became public knowledge and Mordecai wasted no time in getting in touch with Esther telling her that she had to do something. Mordecai even suggested that that was why Esther had become the queen in the first place; so that she would be in a position to save her people! Esther however didn't want to get involved and pointed out that she was just the queen and that the king had all the power. Perhaps the king would even divorce her if she spoke up! Also, since the king didn't know that she was Jewish, she herself might be killed! Why should she risk everything she had, including her very life itself? Mordecai however remained insistent, saying that she had to do something. Eventually, but very reluctantly, she agreed to intervene with the king on her people's behalf.

She entered the throne room and asked the king for a favour. "Name it and it shall be yours" said the king, "you are so beautiful, and I love you so much. I will give you whatever you wish, even up to half of my kingdom". Esther's request however was not what we might expect. Instead of speaking up on behalf of her people, Esther said that she wanted to have a great big dinner party and that it just wouldn't be complete if the king and his Grand Vizier weren't present. One can only assume that she was trying to flatter him before making her request. The king agreed to attend as did Haman. Haman in fact was puffed up with his own self-importance since he had been invited to dinner by the queen! Everyone had a wonderful time at the dinner, but Esther's nerves failed her. She simply could not bring herself to mention the subject of what was going to happen to her people in a few days' time. The best Esther could do was suggest that since this dinner party had been such a marvellous success, why didn't they have another dinner on the following night? Both the king and Haman thought that that was a wonderful idea.

The banquet on the second night was even more successful than the first. The king was so happy that he once again told Esther that she could have whatever she wanted, and this time Esther found the courage to speak up. "Don't kill me!", she begged. When the king demanded to know what she was talking about, she revealed that she was Jewish and so, by implication, the king had sentenced her to death along with the rest of her people. When the king heard this he flew into a terrible rage. Even though he had been more than

willing to go along with Haman's plan in the first place, ordering the deaths of thousands of innocent people, he now saw the plan for what it was, a monstrosity. The king realized that behind the term "the Jews", there were real people including his beloved wife. Angrily the king ordered that Haman be put to death by being hung on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai. And even though he was just a junior official, Mordecai was then promoted to become the Grand Vizier in Haman's place. And as for Esther and the king? They lived happily ever after.

This is a very simplified version of the story of Esther which is one of the books of the Old Testament. If this story sounds a bit like a fairy tale though, that's because that is what it is. Yes, there is *some* history in the story, but most scholars firmly believe that the story of Esther is mostly just that, a story. But did you notice that God is virtually nowhere to be found in this story? Unlike virtually every other book in the Bible, God doesn't speak or intervene; in fact he is hardly ever mentioned. And so, we might well wonder, why is this tale a part of the Bible?

This ancient story is a part of the Bible simply because it reminds us of two very important truths. The first is that even when God seemed to be absent, he was still present with his people. But the story of Esther however doesn't just remind us that God is always present, in its quiet understated way the story also reminds us of how God usually works.

The Bible is full of wonders with God at work in truly spectacular ways. We can think of such episodes as the Burning Bush and the Exodus in the Old Testament for example. In the New Testament, we can think of Jesus' miracles such as the feeding of the thousands, healing of the sick and raising of the dead, all leading up to the greatest wonder of all, his own resurrection. But while God can and indeed does sometimes work through the spectacular and the miraculous, he usually doesn't do so. As I have said in previous sermons and messages, more often than not God works through the ordinary. In the story of Esther for example, God could have saved his people through the spectacular, perhaps by striking the evil Haman dead with a thunderbolt, but he didn't. Instead, God chose to work through the beautiful but shy, insecure, and very reluctant Esther. And as he chose to work through Esther despite her weaknesses and shortcomings, so he has chosen to work through each one of us as well.

All too often we may be tempted to look at our lives, past, present, and future, and wonder what the point of it all is; do the things that we say and do really matter? Do we really matter? We seem to be so small, powerless, and even insignificant in the grand scheme of things. The truth however is that the things we say and do do matter. Our lives do have purpose and meaning. They do simply because we are, day by day, deed by deed, bit by bit, doing nothing less than building the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God here on earth. And it is this that makes our lives so important and even precious. To put it another way, every time we say the Lord's Prayer we say, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". But just how is this done? Through and by each one of us, and that is not a fairy tale.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this, the first Sunday of yet another season in the life of your creation. When we look at the world around us, we see the earliest of the leaves now beginning to change their colours, and we are reminded of the season of beauty now upon us. In two weeks' time we will be celebrating Thanksgiving and so we are reminded too of the season of goodness now upon us.

We thank you for the holy wonder that is you. You have called everything, from the greatest to the least into being. Sometimes we human beings in our arrogance and foolishness pride ourselves on our accomplishments, but what are the greatest of them compared to yours?

We thank you this day for revealing yourself in all of your works, but above all, we thank you for the greatest self revelation of all; your one and only Son. We thank you that our lives are of such value that you humbled yourself by becoming one of us, and that you did this so that we might have life in all of its glorious abundant fullness, now and forevermore. We thank you that our lives are of such value that you are always with us, and that you have even entrusted your work into our all-too-often frail hands. Help us we pray, to realize just how important and precious our lives and those of everyone else truly are.

We pray this day for the well-being and safety of everyone both near and far as the pandemic continues. We especially pray for our young children who are so vulnerable with the return to school and cannot be vaccinated at the present time.

We pray for the well-being of our nation and society after another gruelling election campaign. As a nation and a society, we have different ideas about values and priorities but even so, we pray for the sake of all those elected to office, that they may seek the common good and well-being of all.

We pray for your presence this day in the lives of all those who are hurting; the ill, the grieving, and those whose lives are filled with uncertainty and fear. Help all of us to always remember that we never walk alone and that truly your love and compassion is over all that you have made.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen