

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom), then adapted for use with the Strathfield-Homebush congregation (also by Zoom). We turn today to the book of Esther – a well-loved story, though a gritty one when you read the uncut version provided by the Bible; and one of the books visited by the Lectionary only once over the three-year cycle.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God, our Father,

We praise you that you are present in the world you have created,
that you reveal yourself in ways both great and small.

We give thanks for the scriptures,
through which your people down through the ages
have sought to describe how they have encountered you,
and how they have experienced your presence in their lives.

We praise you that our sacred writings are a unique prophetic and apostolic testimony,
in which we hear your Word
and by which our faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

We give you thanks for those, past and present, who speak your truth –
for prophets, who call out injustice and evil,

for advocates, who speak truth to power,
for missionaries, who bring your Word to those in darkness,
for preachers, who bring the faithful closer to your Word.

We praise you that you always have witnesses in the world
to proclaim your name and your salvation.

We thank you for your hand on human affairs,
gently, sometimes, imperceptibly, nudging situations,
bringing good from bad, and love from hate.

We praise you that you care what happens in the world you have created.

And we thank you for Jesus Christ, your Son,
whom you sent into the world to bring forgiveness and salvation,
who beckons us to new life and new understanding and new purpose.

We praise you that Jesus loved us so much that he laid down his very life,
but that he rose, triumphant from the grave, to defeat the power of sin and death.

Father, we worship you, for you are the God who is with us and loves us,
the God who has revealed himself as our Father.

In so much of what we do, and what we say,
and what we fail to do and fail to say,
we reveal *ourselves* as disciples of sin.

Lord, we come to you as our Father, in the name of Jesus our Saviour,
to seek your forgiveness.

For the thoughtless or wilful act that is harmful or selfish or unjust;
for the words that are thoughtless, destructive or hurtful,
for the attitudes that are selfish or self-centred,
for the prejudices that seek to divide rather than to unite,
for the complacency that engenders inertia and self-satisfaction,
Father forgive us.

Grant us the humility and honesty to know who we are,
the courage to live more as the people you created us to be,

and the discipline to do better in the future than we have managed in the past.
In all our sinfulness,
we come to you, because Jesus died to open the way to your seat of mercy.
Forgive us we pray.
Amen

2 Declaration of Forgiveness.

We are assured by the psalmist,
*The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.*
We are confident to proclaim that, in Jesus Christ,
our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 Bible Reading –

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22.

The full book doesn't take long to read, and would be far better than just the Lectionary "bit".

4 Sermon: See below

5 Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer

(Tuesday was International Day of Peace, and our prayers today are for peace in the world.)

Lord our God,

We are so distracted by the pandemic which has beset the world,
and turned so much on its head,
that we too seldom notice that the world is still troubled by many conflicts.

So today,

we turn our attention to the wars and violence that affect so many places.

Father, we have just seen the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

We pray that the seemingly endless conflict in that benighted country
will now cease, and that the welfare of the people can become the focus.

Nearby, we pray for peace on unsettled borders –

between India and Pakistan, and between India and China.

We pray for calm and peace for those who feel threatened by China –

for the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan,

for the nations of the South China Sea, for Japan.

And we pray that the apparent bellicosity of North Korea will be softened.

Further afield, we pray for peace in the Middle East,

in Syria, where the civil war is still ongoing,

between Israel and the Palestinians,

between Iran and her neighbours

and in the civil war in Yemen.

In Europe, violence has bloodied the streets of Belarus,

while fighting continues in the Ukraine.

In Africa, we pray for peace in Chad, in the Democratic Republic of Congo,
in Eretria and Ethiopia and Somaliland and Algeria,
in Tunisia, Morocco, Nigeria and Mauritania.
In all these places of conflict, Father,
the interests of national pride, or the leaders' politics or ideologies,
relegate the wellbeing of the people to last place.
It is always the innocent who suffer when the shooting starts –
the innocent who go hungry, are rendered homeless,
are wounded, maimed or killed,
while the nation's resources are invested in destruction rather than construction.
Bring sanity, a love of peace, a willingness to compromise,
an ability to step back from entrenched positions,
so that peace may come, and with it, blessing and prosperity for the people.
Father we pray for the day
when the vast resources of nations that are invested in war,
and preparations for war, can, instead, be used for human welfare.
Bring peace to our world, Father, we pray.
May your longed for Kingdom descend upon us
and bring lasting and secure peace.

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

6 **Blessing and Dismissal**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

Esther is one of those books visited by the Lectionary only once in the three-year cycle. As I was thinking about it, I read an experienced commentator's warning: "Preaching on Esther is not for the faint-hearted." There are a number of reasons for this caution, and I thought long and hard about preaching on Esther.

Even Esther's *place* in the canonical scriptures is contested. When the Jewish rabbis were firming up what was, and what was not, to be included in their sacred writings, many questioned the value of Esther. In the Christian era, Martin Luther absolutely hated Esther, and wrote that there was no other book in the scriptures less worthy of its place in the Bible. More than a few agreed with him and continue to do so. It's not that hard to see why.

Along with Song of Songs, another contested book, Esther makes not a single direct reference to God. Not one. Events unfold, and an ending which is supposed to be a happy one is achieved, by the scheming and actions of people, and without any clear reference to God. There is no mention of prayer, of sacred ritual, of sacrifice, or of *anything* remotely associated with the Jews' covenantal relationship with God – with the one exception of fasting. Esther reads far more like a good story – and it *is* a good story – than a piece of scripture.

The characters who people Esther are less than attractive. Yes, it's a classic story of goodies and baddies. In today's short passage, we meet Haman, the villain-in-chief. Haman's conceit and arrogance had led him to secure from the King a decree for the massacre of the Jews, all because Mordecai (who is a Jew) had refused to pay homage to him; and when the story's climax occurs, Haman is on his way to ask the King for an order decreeing Mordecai's death. So our baddie is pretty awful – but that's to be expected of a baddie.

The goodies, too, though are less than admirable characters. When the King decides to take a new wife, he orders that beautiful young virgins be brought from throughout the empire. Esther is included, and takes her place in the harem, but under strict instructions from her uncle Mordecai that she not reveal her Jewishness. Neither "Mordecai" nor "Esther" are Jewish names. Esther's real name was Hadassah, but only we are privy to that secret. Nothing whatsoever in Esther's behaviour would betray that she was a Jew. So there are deception and scheming from the first in our heroine. The King's way of choosing his new queen was to spend a night with each of the young women on offer. Esther sought advice from the king's eunuch about what would please the King, and so managed to trump all the other contenders and claim the King's hand. Lauris tells me that she read this story as a child; I can only think that it must have undergone quite a bit of sanitising first. Esther's method of winning the King's heart is a pretty adult kind of tale!

Later in the story, when, by Esther's clever strategy, the tables are turned on Haman, it's triumphantly agreed that Haman should die on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. This is retributive justice, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It's worthy of the Greek concept of Nemesis. And when the King's decree that the Jews be massacred inexplicably cannot be revoked, he issues another decree permitting the Jews to fight back when they're attacked. The story of Esther ends with the triumph of the Jews, and *their* killing of countless citizens who had attacked them in accordance with their King's decree. The Jews' deliverance from this mortal danger led to the festival of Purim, a happy ending for the Jews, but scarcely an edifying tale overall. Even the goodies in this story are deceitful, manipulative and bloodthirsty.

Perhaps you can see why Esther's place in the canon is so contested.

I think the situation is made worse by the book's placement in our Old Testament. In the Jewish

scriptures, there are three divisions: Torah (or Law), Prophets, and “Writings”. “Writings” contains a variety of different texts, most of which could be described as “literature” of one sort or another. If Esther is a *story*, then perhaps we can permit it some of the excesses of storytelling. Perhaps it warrants its place in the “Writings” section of the Jewish scriptures. But in Christian Bibles, Esther takes its place in the division of books that are broadly called “history”. By that placement, a work which might be thought of as an exciting tale of deliverance implicitly becomes a factual account of real events in the God-directed story of the Jewish people. Seen in that light, Luther’s abhorrence for Esther is hardly surprising.

So, given all those problems, why are we troubling ourselves with Esther today? There are two reasons. First of all, the fact is that Esther *is* in the canon. We cannot just ignore it. We can’t cherry-pick the scriptures for the ones that don’t trouble us. Whatever Esther’s difficulties, we need to be prepared to confront them. But second, and more importantly, I think there is genuinely something to be gained from this enigmatic book and the flawed characters who populate it.

The Jews’ captivity in Babylon came to an end when King Cyrus of Persia decreed that the Jews were to be released, and allowed to return to their homeland. But not all of them did return to Judah. Many settled around the new Persian Empire, and so began the Jewish diaspora. Esther is believed to have been written somewhere in that diaspora, perhaps in the fifth or fourth century BC. The King who figures in Esther as an easily manipulated and characterless man is named Ahasueras. He is a real figure, known to European history as Xerxes, the Great King who attempted to conquer the Greek states in the fifth century. So, without suggesting in the least that this story should be taken as literally true, it reflects a real situation set against a real historical backdrop.

The Jews who did not return to Judah had had their Judaism shaped by the exile. There had been no Temple; there had been no nation upon which to focus a national identity; and in fact their identity had become a liability. It was because of *who* they were that they found themselves *where* they were. We have very little idea what the religious beliefs and practices of these people were, but it would not be at all surprising if they *were* very different from those that were finding expression in the newly reconstituted nation of Judah. If their covenantal relationship with God seemed far less real, if they had lost all connection with the cultic practices of the Temple, if they were far less overt and public in any display of their religion and culture, if they accommodated themselves to the ways of the world around them, then we would hardly be surprised.

And *that* is exactly the situation we find in Esther. These are not the Jews who shaped the final version of the Jewish scriptures, nor the Jews who gave rise to the very strict order of the Pharisees. They are not the Jews whom we encounter in the gospels – though they *may* be more like the Jews whom Paul was later to meet in the Eastern Roman Empire. In those terms, these Jews *are* heavily flawed characters. Perhaps in Esther we have a reasonably accurate portrayal of the Jews of the diaspora.

Now, we mentioned before that God gets no mention in Esther, and that is certainly true. But it’s been pointed out that God is a silent *presence* in the story. In Esther there are any number of echoes of Old Testament stories in which God is actively involved. Without going into details, it’s easy to find parallels of the stories of Joseph in Egypt, of Moses, and of various other biblical characters. In the stories that find an echo in Esther, God is present and active. These echoes surely bespeak God’s presence in the mind of the writer, even though God is not explicitly named.

So too do the many coincidences on which the story turns. Someone once described coincidences as God’s unsigned paintings. In Esther, things just keep falling into their right place because of an unseen and unnamed divine hand. The pivot point of Esther occurs when the King just happens to remember that Mordecai had saved his life, and decides to honour and reward him; and it just

happens that, on that very day, Haman was at court to seek Mordecai's death. Mordecai's elevation, and Haman's humiliation, are the result of remarkable coincidences.

In that sense, Esther should give *us* some level of comfort. I know a few people who say that God's appeared to them, and maybe he has. I know more than a few who say that God has directly spoken to them, one even, who happily talks about his chats with God, and maybe that *has* been their experience. But it's not the experience of most of us. *We* read the Old Testament, especially, and find all these direct encounters with God. God appears to his chosen ones all the time, and speaks directly to them; and we find ourselves wondering why that is not *our* experience, nor the experience of most people we know. Are we not faithful enough? Doesn't God care about us? Has God no place in his plan for us? Is there something *wrong* with us?

No, says the book of Esther, to us and to all who have ever had such thoughts. God can be, and is, present in situations, and in people's lives, without ever showing himself, and without ever overtly speaking to anyone. That is *our* experience, or at least the experience of most of us. Most of us believe that our lives have been touched by God, but few of us could write down the dialogue we had with him at the time. It wasn't like that for most of us. God can and does manage things differently for a great many people. And that is *exactly* what we find in Esther. Esther *validates* our experience as ordinary people, because the people of Esther are also very ordinary people.

Indeed, as we've observed, the people of Esther are flawed people, and yet God uses them in the story. It is through these flawed characters that God achieves the safety of his people throughout the Persian Empire. Esther reminds us that God does not need saints, nor does he require deeply religious, observant or pious people, to accomplish his purposes. God uses ordinary people, and ordinary people are flawed people. *Our* hope to be the people of God in the world depends entirely on God's willingness to use flawed people, for that is who we are. Esther reminds us of God's generosity in that respect. The woman whose bedroom shenanigans won her the role of Queen of Persia, and whose deception disguised her true identity as one of God's people, was the instrument through whom God ensured the safety of all those flawed children of Israel. Esther validates our hope, as deeply flawed people, that God still has a place for us in his Kingdom.

Indeed, as Christians, we can go an important step further than could the writer of Esther. We affirm that it is in fact *because* we are sinful, flawed and impious people that God reached out to us in Jesus Christ. *God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but to save the world.* When we look at the less than perfect people of Esther, we could be looking in a kind of mirror. We are in no position to sit in judgment of them, for we *are* they, and they *are* us. If our salvation depended in any way on what we must do, then all is lost. The good news is what God has done for us – undeserving and sinful as we are.

We make a mistake if we cast either Esther or Mordecai as the hero of this story. The hero of this story is God, the God whom it never mentions, the God who is apparently ignored by his people, but the God who reaches into the situation in all its humanness and sin, and who wrings good out of all the pervasive imperfection. Esther reminds us that God is *always* the hero in the story.

Preaching on Esther may not be for the faint-hearted, but that is not because of the book's distasteful characters. Esther brings us face-to-face with the wonder and the movement of God, and that is certainly not for the faint of heart.

Amen