

SERMON: Sunday – 7 May 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

He does wonderful things

Esther 7:1-10; 9:20-22

Luke 13:10-17

In the words of my name sake William Cowper (spelt the proper way):

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants his
footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm

Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill He treasures up his bright
designs And works his sov'reign will.

One of the certain things about the Book of Esther is how the hidden hand of
God is there in all things for those with eyes to see.

(SLIDE)

As Diane Tidball puts it, "His silent hand is moving in ways that we might not
recognise until eternity".

Isn't that so true. That we might not understand things fully or see things until
they're illuminated by the light of eternity. We might not recognise that it was
God until we God as God truly is.

And even before then it's often not until long after an event that we can look
back and see that God was there all along. That seems to be the story of so
many people who come to faith and look back. Finally accepting that we are
loved we see that God was there all the time.

Today, we arrive at the conclusion of the story of Esther. Following weeks of
the story building, we have seen the downfall of Queen Vashti, the rise of
Queen Esther, the plot of Haman to destroy the Jewish people, and Esther's
plan to win the King's favour and free her people.

No doubt Esther looked back and saw the hand of God in these times.
God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

Last week we saw the tension build, as Esther lay the groundwork in her plan
to save her people. Today we see not only Esther confront the king asking for
the freedom and protection of the Jewish people, but also accusing Haman,
bringing to light his actions and ultimately toppling him.

There is an interesting, even confusing, verse that leaves us asking questions about the motives and tactics of Esther in this saga. Her justification for asking for the freedom of her people, is that anything else would harm the king, She says: "If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." (7:4)

This statement is a recognition of the plight of her people and of the power she has within the system. Rather than argue against their enslavement, rather than speak of oppression, she appeals to something the King understands and cares about: his property.

In almost a return to where we started, with Queen Vashti being an attractive object possessed by the King, Esther understands that the King would not tolerate the destruction of what he regards as his property, the Jewish people and his Queen.

Esther uses this political state to achieve her aims. This may not result in their absolute liberation, but it will avoid their destruction. In essence Esther is not allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good. She takes what she can.

We should, nevertheless, not forget that this remains a story of oppression, political and sexual violence, as well as enslavement. Its a story that prevails in the midst of an imperfect, unjust world on its way to redemption.

A lot has been made of God not being mentioned in the Book of Esther, the conclusion we read today appears to be brought about by the actions of Esther, not God. Its a book that speaks of the lives of God's people. It is a book that offers space for readers and hearers to seek God in the reality of daily life, and in the difficulties of human experience.

In this final week of our short series looking at Esther's story we see the Jewish people overcoming their oppressors, taking control, even taking up arms against them. We see the excessive self pride of Haman, resulting in him being hung on his own gallows. It is a book that reminds us that the story of God's people, throughout history and up to the present day, is not a simple one, is not one without nuance, it is instead a story of real people living real lives, often under real oppression and violence.

This is an opportunity for us to reflect on the stories we tell and why, as well as the stories we do not tell and why. It is a chance for the church to recognise the light of God in the people who are ignored and maligned. To speak to the oppressed and marginalised. And look for ways in which we can seek to give voice to the whole variety of God's people, not only those with power or who hold the majority opinion.

Mordecai sums up the story by telling us that these were days when “the Jews gained relief from their enemies and (a time) that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor (9:22).

When Jesus, on a Sabbath, heals the woman crippled by an evil spirit the crowd are astounded by the wonderful things he was doing.

Looking back on all that we’ve seen so far, can we too see that God has done wonderful things, in us, for us and around us?

And might we describe them as days of sorrow becoming days of gladness and days of mourning becoming holy days?

Jesus calls us, in the power of his Spirit, to be ministers of reconciliation. People who live towards and for days where sorrow turns to gladness and mourning into holy days; and like God’s people rejoicing in their deliverance from destruction, it’s right to celebrate even small steps towards freedom and reconciliation and to share the good gifts that result, with one another and especially with those in need.

Because as ministers of reconciliation we hold to the conviction that in the end, with God, all will be well and all will see that yes God does wonderful things and life is full of beauty and grace and love.

As we will sing in a moment:

Through the love of God our Saviour All will be well
Though we pass through tribulation All will be well
We expect a bright tomorrow All will be well

The Deliverer has come to free God’s people from all that harms them; to lift up those bent low; to straighten crooked backs; to reinterpret the Sabbath as the everyday opportunities for the Kingdom of God to be seen; to enable wonderful things to happen through the faith of everyday people.

So keep on keeping on. Know that, as you look back, God has been there all along, doing wonderful things that in the end will be clearly seen as moments of grace in a world on its way to freedom.

May we live and breath such faith in every moment we have.

Amen.