

SERMON: Sunday – 16 April 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

All Change for Everyone

Esther 1:10-22

Matthew 28:1-10

All Change for Everyone

The Hebrew book of Esther is about rule and reign. I say that because the Hebrew word (m-l-k) occurs some 250 times whereas any word for God is absent. It's the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God. It is a book that many churches overlook, likely because of this fact. But God is in it throughout.

So it's about rule and reign, and we see how rule can be abused if not given into the hands of a loving God.

The book is also about feasts. There are 8 feasts or banquets mentioned in Esther from beginning to end. And again the nature of the feasts vary, from a lavish banquet which lasted 180 days to celebrate the king's imperial power and wealth, to a feast to celebrate the survival of the Jewish faith in every province.

At the same time as King Xerxes was giving a second lavish feast, with an abundance of wine served in golden goblets, each one unique, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women. After 7 days of indulgence, the king decided to summon his queen to show off her beauty.

To which Queen Vashti said no. She said no to a bully used to demanding his own way. Xerxes wanted to parade his queen, like some sort of prized possession, before the big wigs and the powers that be. .

As one Bible commentary puts it,
"He saw Queen Vashti as another of his wonderful possessions, something to be shown off, something that would impress. The invitation command to Queen Vashti to attend him in her crown, was not an attempt to enjoy her company, but rather display her as an object".

The opportunity to appear before the other state leaders was not for Vashti's benefit of course. It was purely for the king's own edification. To have his ego stroked. All because he expected people to do exactly what he demanded

There are world leaders like that in our own day, causing havoc across the world, trying to maintain some degree of rule through violent means.

It's not easy to stand up to bullies. Few have the courage to do so.

One of my earliest memories was when I was in primary school and there was the local bully, Robert, from a notorious family. And one day he decided he didn't like me and followed me into the cloak room during break time. I'd no idea what I'd done wrong but he just came up to me and stared at me, his face inches away from mine. To which I said sorry, even though I didn't think I'd done anything. It didn't help me though for he punched me in the face and walked away without saying anything.

It's not easy to stand up to bullies. Few have the courage to do so. Though in that case I'm not sure what courage would have looked like. Maybe to tell the teacher but at the time you daren't do such a thing.

But Queen Vashti summoned the courage she needed and refused the king's demand. And the king was furious and burned with anger (12).

We're not surprised to read that the king's advisers, his wise men, when asked how the king should respond, counsel that Vashti need be dealt with harshly because if he didn't, this was going to be the start of a slippery slope towards women's rights. Before they knew it, women everywhere were going to be saying no to their husbands and the whole world order be thrown into disarray!

Their advice was basically that women must respect their husbands and should be taught a lesson on how important this is.

And so a decree was sent out stating that every man should be ruler - there's that word again - ruler over his own household.

One commentator points out how ridiculous this decree was since it would be impossible to enforce and indicates that men were not actually dominant in their households.

However, this idea of men dominating households seems to have stuck in certain biblical circles.

But let me point out that this sort of view point can only be said in the context of reciprocity and only where the nature of the rule (or dominance) is rooted in love for the other and not in self interest. In other words, yes wives are to respect their husbands but husbands must love their wives as well.

If mutual, reciprocating love and respect are missing then the husband/wife relationship is imbalanced and in some cases might even be abusive. We could say that for any relationship indeed.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 5:33,

“each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband”.

In Queen Vashti’s case, this was the last straw as far as the king was concerned and so in an attempt to seem strong, he entirely overacts, says he will never see Vashti again, and she is replaced by a younger model as we’ll find out next week.

It may have been common at the time but that wasn’t love at work in their relationship. The king demonstrates an abuse of power. He may not have been physically abusive but it was still a violent act.

As an aside, I was pleased to see that the Church of Scotland is hosting a seminar for men on what every man can do to help prevent violence against women. And I would encourage men to attend (SLIDE). Sadly, violence against women is not something confined to the annals history.

And so it was that the king
silenced Queen Vashti’s “No!”
but her “No!” started a ball rolling
that would eventually change everything.
This was only the beginning
of the king’s troubles.

King Xerxes would have done well to have taken a breath rather than rush into action. His overreaction, his attempt to argue back is precisely the reason why Vashti’s story lived on. Far more people heard about her actions through his decree than would have had he remained silent. He would have done better to say nothing and let the story die on its own.

The whole story raises the questions about right and wrong, about the need to persist. About the truth at the heart of any power structure built on inequality, discrimination and terror. There is an anxiety amongst those ‘in power’ that those they oppress might one day topple them. The advisors and the King may have removed Queen Vashti, but at the heart of this action was the fear that she could bring them all down.

I liked this reflection from Spill the Beans:

What if ‘no’ is the right answer?
It is such a tiny word.
And carries so much weight.
Often it is the hardest answer to give.

Our temptation is to please.
To say 'yes'
rather than cause hurt or stress.
Not just for you but for others.

'No' can open doors
not just close them.
'No' can lift weights
heavier than any dumbbell.
'No' can save you from sinking beneath the surface of life.
'No' can save others from themselves.
'No' can save the planet
instead of causing more damage.
'No' can release the potential in others.
What if 'no' is the right answer?
What if it has the power to set you free.
Freedom to say 'yes' to the right things.

It's true that as well as it being hard to stand up to bullies, it can be hard to say 'no', even although that might be the best answer all round.

But sometimes we need to stop doing things because they've run their course or they're no longer life affirming or life giving. For those things we need to say 'no' because we are alive to God's Spirit of Resurrection.

The women arriving at Easter's empty tomb, were met with the words of resurrection - he is not here. He is risen.

Matthew prefaces these words with the angel saying, "I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. For he has risen".

Luke's version prefaces that Scripture with the words, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (24:5).

They were to no longer look for life where there was death. They were to say no to death; no to dying things, no to things with no life in them.

It's perhaps an interesting aside that the women arriving at the tomb hadn't been going with the intention to look for the living but its the angels that interpret their vocation as seeking the living.

Even when we're not looking for it, there is a divine force guiding us to seek life. Like the women seeking Jesus even though he was dead. That is what resurrection is all about. And it affects everything we do and say. We are aiming at life, at hope, at nothing being impossible for God and with God.

The Risen Jesus, the Christ, said to the women, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Galilee is where it all started and its the place symbolic of new beginnings. Its where Jesus' birth took place and ministry started (Acts 10:37). And its where his followers would see him again, this time in Risen Power.

If we too are to go to Galilee and seek the Christ, the Risen Jesus, what will that mean for each of us? What might we be called to say 'no' to, that we might give our 'yes' to something more? In the light of resurrection, how might we see everything around us with new sight?

Let me finish with a word of resurrection on this second Sunday of Easter. The Scriptures declare that as in Adam all die so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Richard Rohr puts this into is a wonderful invitation to all of us who seek this life of Christ in all.

Christ is the light that allows people to see things in their fullness. The precise and intended effect of such a light is to see Christ everywhere else. In fact, that is my only definition of a true Christian. A mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else. That is a definition that will never fail us, always demand more of us, and give us no reasons to fight, exclude, or reject anyone.

(The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe (New York: Convergent, 2021)).