

## **SERMON: Sunday – 30 April 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Esther: God has come to help his people**

Esther 5:1-18 JS

Luke 7:11-17

Much of today's story from the Book of Esther is very much the middle of the story. It's neither a beginning nor an ending.

We live out most of our lives not in the exiting endings, but in the tension building middle, these in-between times, waiting times, maybe even boring times. Much of the time in life we're left to wonder what we might do, wonder where God is, wonder how God is acting.

And so we might ask ourselves in such times, how might we seek out the glory and presence of God in the mundane?

At this point in the Esther story we can see how she did just that.

The STB commentary includes this reflection on Esther:

Her exile name, 'Esther', means 'hidden'.  
There are so many things she has to hide:  
her heritage,  
her faith,  
herself.  
All needs to be subsumed  
in order to survive.  
On the surface—  
the very beautiful and pleasing surface—  
she tends to silence,  
speaks only when spoken to,  
is submissive,  
does as she's told,  
does what's expected:  
a passive plaything.

She is an ornament,  
one of the King's collectibles,  
an object to be admired  
and to desire only him.

Her Jewish name, 'Hadassah',

means 'myrtle'  
whose fragrance comes only  
when placed under pressure:  
her position,  
her privilege,  
her skills—  
all need to be employed  
in order to save lives.

Below the surface—  
that perfectly lovely surface—  
she tends to watch,  
waiting for opportunities,  
ca canny,  
does what she needs to do  
to preserve herself,  
her people:

a woman of courage,  
this exile and orphan  
collects herself,  
turns the banquet table  
to her advantage  
and endures.

(SLIDE)

Diane Tidball has written a commentary on Esther called Esther - A True First Lady. In it she describes how Esther "is an icon because she is a role model of how it is possible to live and work within a godless system and be a channel of his grace allowing his purpose to be fulfilled" (10).

We see that Esther risks her life to go into the presence of the King, her husband of sorts, and to enter into that place of excessive feasting in order to help save her people. But to do so she had to play the long game. She had to seemingly go along with all the worldly feasting and excess in order to be granted an audience.

Esther reveals herself as the coolest of operators seeking to follow God's leading. She fasted, prayed, prepared and waited for the right time to act (97, 98).

The king, having had his fill of wine, sounds like King Herod in Jesus time when Herod promises the daughter of Herodias up to half his kingdom and she, with her mother's help, goes on to demand the head of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17).

Likewise Esther is promised up to half the kingdom. Just say what you want and it will be yours.

We can almost hear Jesus saying, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you (Luke 12:20).

Esther manages to lure the King in further by giving him what she knew he'd want - more feasting, another banquet. And so Haman is invited into the plot, lured in by the tempting promise of food and drink and adoration.

But anything less than complete adoration isn't enough for Haman. Not while Mordecai, the Jew, neither rises nor trembles before him (9). Despite being invited to dine with the King, it wasn't enough for Haman as long as Mordecai was around.

And so he takes advice from those he knows will tell him what he wants to hear. His wife and friends counsel him with words he agrees with and preparations are made for Mordecai to be hanged.

Little did he know that the very gallows he had built would prove to be the means of his own end. He was constructing his own punishment. Again, we can hear Jesus, by the measure you use so it will be measured to you (Matthew 7:2). Or those who live by the sword die by the sword (Matthew 25:62).

(SLIDE)

Diane Tidball says in her commentary about this:

"There is a reminder in this part of the events of Esther that we should choose our friends with care, particularly if we are in leadership. Be careful when you receive compliments from friends. Are they speaking the truth or what you want to hear?"

She goes on to advise that when we have important decisions to make or need advice, we need to have the confidence to ask people whose comments won't be tainted by self-interest, loyalty or an unwillingness to disappoint" (103).

But back to Esther. Mordecai must've felt that he'd had his life saved from death. Esther's courage had been key. She'd indeed been there for such a time as this and God had worked through her to save his people. God's favour was there to be seen in that ancient story.

It wasn't until centuries later, when Jesus raised the dead son of a widow from Nain that the people in response called out that "God has come to help his people".

When Jesus raised her only son from the dead in front of a crowd, the people were amazed and declared that God's favour was upon his people.

The book of Esther may not mention God by name but God is present indeed.

So what else might we learn from these stories of salvation and life?

We might see how Esther dressed up and showed respect for the office of the king in the same way that the New Testament calls on Jesus followers to show respect to their leaders for they are appointed by God even though they may not always act like it.

(SLIDE)

Romans 13:1 says, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Or as 1 Peter 2:17 puts it,  
Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God,  
honour the emperor.

And 1 Corinthians 9:22

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

Or we might take wisdom from Proverbs 18:16,  
A gift opens the way  
and ushers the giver into the presence of the great.

Esther employed these skills. So did Jesus. And so might we.