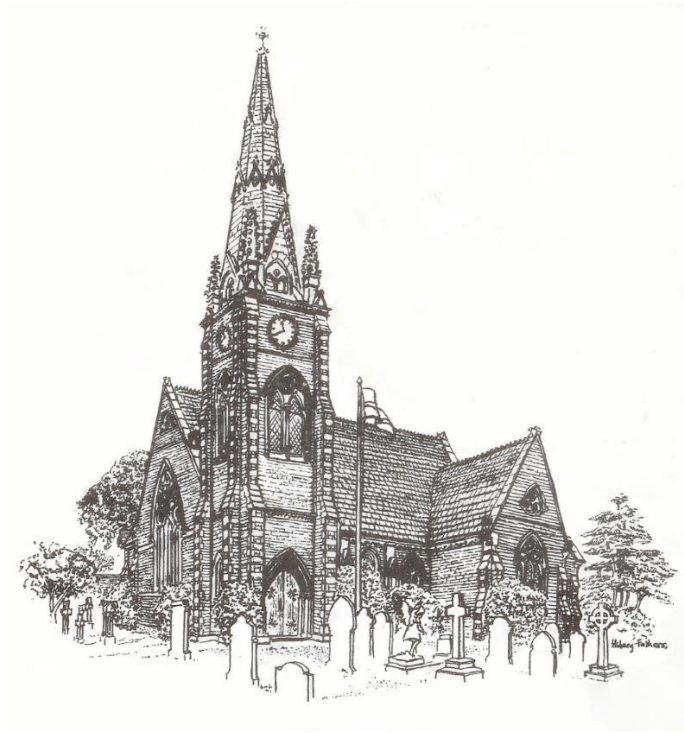


All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

Week 3

Thursday March 4th: Omri: [1 Kings 16: 15-28](#): 'But Omri did evil'



Fortress ruins, Herodion

Today's passage briefly describes, in not much more than a footnote, the historically pretty spectacular reign of King Omri. He became king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel a little less than 50 years after the split with the Southern Kingdom (which continued to be ruled by descendants of David) and reigned for about 12 years. In terms of

the wider history of the time he was an extremely significant figure who was militarily successful and established a powerful dynasty. He also founded Samaria, the capital city of his kingdom (1 Kings 16 v 24). The "Moabite stone", discovered in 1868 at Dibon in Jordan by German missionary Frederick Augustus Klein (who became an Anglican priest and worked for what is now the Church Mission Society), contains these references to King Omri from a later Moabite leader, King Mesha:

'Omri was king of Israel, and oppressed Moab during many days, and Chemosh [the Moabite deity] was angry with his aggressions. His son succeeded him, and he also said, I will oppress Moab.'

Other Assyrian inscriptions reveal that the northern kingdom of Israel was referred to as the 'Land of Omri' and the royal dynasty as the 'House of Omri' for over a century after his death. Yet the reign of this towering historical figure is given just 14 verses in 1 Kings 16, nearly half of which recount how he came to power. The reason for this is that the history writers of the Old Testament aren't all that impressed by his successes (you could find out about them elsewhere if you were interested - see v 27). Their assessment of the kings of Israel is based entirely on their faithfulness, or lack of it, to God and it's clear that from their point of view the most significant thing about Omri is that he repeated the mistakes of Jeroboam, first king of the Northern Kingdom, in deliberately turning aside from his vocation to lead a people loyal to God by fostering the worship of idols.

If we check out the only other reference to him in the Old Testament it's clear that his name remained a byword for the evils of idolatry for many years after his reign. Micah, prophesying to the Southern Kingdom of Judah about 150

years later, does not mince his words and foresees ruinous consequences as he accuses the people of following the 'statutes of Omri' (Micah 6 v 16), clearly in context a reference to the worship of false idols. In a twist of irony, ruin did eventually overtake the Northern Kingdom during Micah's lifetime as it was conquered by the Assyrians who deported many of its people and brought its history to a close.

The story of Omri reminds us of the perennial relevance of Lord Acton's aphorism that, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Omri seems to have been a leader who was extremely capable but morally and spiritually bankrupt. We live at a time when populist and autocratic leaders have come to power in many countries with their divisive messages often carried via social media. Some of these leaders have cemented their power effectively for life; Presidents Putin of Russia and Xi of China being two examples. I have never understood the obsession with power but it seems to work like a drug, once you have had a fix you just can't get enough of it. But it doesn't need to be so. Nelson Mandela showed us that it is possible to lead a country whilst retaining your humanity and maintaining an attitude of public service.

Jesus never really bothered much with those in power (until he had to) preferring to spend much of his time with the 'ptochos', the poorest of the poor, made up of those were excluded from the rest of society, often reduced to begging. It was here that he nurtured the good seed of the coming kingdom. In an age where it seems that certain people have an entitlement to a lifestyle beyond the dreams of the vast majority, we need to shift our gaze away from the trappings of power and address, in whatever way we are able, however small that might be, the appalling injustices that scar this beautiful world in which all were meant to be able to live without want.

Part of the problem relates very specifically to Omri; the tendency of humanity to worship idols rather than the Lord of heaven and earth. In Omri's time it was the gods of the surrounding nations that subverted the vocation of his people to worship and serve God. As we see in the writings of the prophets this wasn't just an end in itself as in; 'serve me and not them or else'. Turning away from the one who had liberated the people and created a covenant with them had disastrous consequences for the moral and spiritual life of the nation. Micah, referred to earlier, addresses a community which has lost its moral compass

because it has lost touch with its foundational calling to be the people of God, 'Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a bribe, and her prophets tell fortunes for money' (Micah 3 v 11). Money is talking so loudly it is drowning out the voice of God.

The idols of money, sex and power, which all figure prominently in the Old Testament narrative, are still extremely voluble today demanding our attention and claiming our allegiance. As human beings we have a God given need to worship but we too often look in the wrong place which means that, whether we mean to or not, we set up idols that sometimes hide in plain sight. We live in a culture in which rock stars, sports stars, soap stars, film stars and reality stars are placed on idolatrous pedestals meaning that even the most intimate details of their lives are dissected in the kind of gossip magazines people glance through while waiting for a haircut. These are lent a significance that enables their worshippers to get vicarious thrills (the lives of many celebrities are rarely their own) before returning to the seemingly mundane and unimportant matters that make up their own daily lives back at ground level. We have become worshippers with an increasing addiction to and reliance on such things as social media which too often mean we spend much of our lives with our attention focused on stuff that either doesn't matter or is even positively harmful, such as the conspiracy theories of QAnon that are engaging certain mindsets in the United States (including some evangelical Christian communities) in very worrying ways.

What Christians are being called to do; what you and I are being called to do is to worship the Lord our God. This means that we put him first and define ourselves as those whose lives are focused on prayer, engagement with scripture, worship and service. This does not mean that we have to throw our phones and tablets away (although it might mean that we use them less) but it does mean that we make space in our lives and in our hearts to hear the voice of God addressing our distracted hearts and minds with a gentle whisper and a call to serve.

Questions: What does it mean to worship God every day of our lives? What are the marks of a life focused on serving Christ?

Prayer: Lord, we live in a society distracted by so many things that do not matter. Help us to shape our lives around our relationship with you. Amen.

**Saturday March 6th: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah: [Daniel 3:1-30](#):
'Look! I see four men...'**



*Pilgrims singing in St Anne's Church,
Jerusalem.*

Who are these three guys, you may well ask? Whilst Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were their Jewish birth names, we know them more familiarly by their Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Along with Daniel they were born in Judah but after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC, along with many of the great and good, they

were forced into exile. They quickly found that there were opportunities in King Nebuchadnezzar's court at Babylon for bright young men and they undertook training which opened doors to highly influential positions in the king's service (Daniel 1 v 5; 19-20).

However, given that Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were faithful Jews living and working in an alien culture with very different religious beliefs it was pretty much inevitable that they would come across a roadblock. It arrived in the shape of a ninety feet high golden image which, whilst it may or may not have been of the king himself, was designed as a very visible object of worship. Here the unstoppable force of absolute royal power meets the immovable object of a strongly held faith; every single person assembled on the plain of Dura that day, Jewish exiles included, was instructed to bow down to the statue.

From time to time in our own day, on the news or in a documentary, we see members of ruling assemblies in totalitarian states on their feet giving the dictator a standing ovation. What we are not able to see is what these acolytes are thinking privately; they all know they have no choice but to play the part of sycophants to protect their jobs and their lives. So it was for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – they were caught between a rock and hard place whereby they had to choose between betraying their Jewish beliefs and disobeying the king's command.

Their loyalty to God led them to a fiery furnace blazing even hotter than the king's anger at their disobedience. The story of their deliverance from the fire which didn't burn a hair of their heads and the presence of a fourth (presumably

angelic) human figure in the fire with them vindicates the stand they have taken and leads to profound change in Nebuchadnezzar. He, of course, goes the whole hog with dire consequences promised now for anybody uttering a word against 'the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego' (v 29). It is worth noting in passing that the king has not become a convert as a result of this remarkable deliverance, God is still 'their own God' (v28).

In the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, the reference to those who 'quenched the fury of the flames' (v 34) is very likely a nod to this story. However, whilst much of that chapter is about those delivered by God from all kinds of trials and tribulations, it goes on to list those whose struggles did not have such a happy outcome (v 35-38) and where there was no miraculous divine intervention to save people from prison, persecution, isolation and death.

This inconsistency of fate for those whose faith leads to conflict with religious and political leaders continues in the New Testament. Whilst James is put to death by the sword (Acts 12 v 2), Peter is subsequently rescued from incarceration by an angel (Acts 12 v 6-10). This surely does not mean that Peter mattered more than James. Testimonies from the 260 million Christians persecuted for their faith today suggest the same pattern (or lack of it). Whilst some, either through their own efforts or with help from organisations supporting them such as Open Doors (www.opendoorsuk.org), have been able to support themselves and live in safety, others have suffered less happy outcomes. The week before these words were written 39 people were murdered in the Democratic Republic of Congo just because they were Christians. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are being held in appalling conditions in labour camps in North Korea because of their faith.

Whilst there are many wonderful stories of answers to prayers and an enormous amount of prayerful work continues to be done in support of Christians who live day by day with the threats of losing their jobs, families or even their lives, not everybody can be brought into a safe place.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were denounced by their colleagues out of jealousy (v 8), no doubt, at their rise through the ranks of the government administration. Their answer after they were hauled before the king speaks volumes. They did have faith that God will deliver them from the fiery furnace

and yet, ‘...even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods...’ (v 18). They were fully prepared to pay the price if on this occasion there is no divine intervention. There is an implicit acknowledgement here that God is not always at hand with a ‘get out of jail free’ card but there is a loyalty to God that will face the consequences, whatever they may be.

In our own lives there may well be moments when the situation we find ourselves in leads to a potential conflict with our faith. We may not be taken off to prison or murdered for our beliefs but we might be ostracised, laughed at, marginalised, scorned or misunderstood. In our working life we may be asked to collude with a decision that, for instance, unnecessarily threatens people’s livelihoods here or overseas or that involves, at the very least, being economical with the truth. It might be that saying no to something we know to be wrong costs a friendship or carries a financial penalty. There are some tough choices to be made sometimes and the consequences of doing the right thing (or not doing the wrong thing) can be unpredictable.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah remind us that loyalty to God has to come first and that our lives need to be shaped around our faith rather than the other way round. This will sometimes require much prayerful thinking; knowing what is the right course of action can be difficult to fathom and there may well be subtle nuances to take into account. There may be problems whichever way we look! Faith can be costly. Jesus not only gave up the joy of heaven but lived a life of service that took him inevitably to the cross (Phil 2 v 6-8). Whilst Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah emerged unharmed from the heat of the fire, there was no divine rescue from the agony of crucifixion for Jesus; no legions of angels appeared to carry him to safety as he was arrested, tried, mocked, sentenced, flogged and killed.

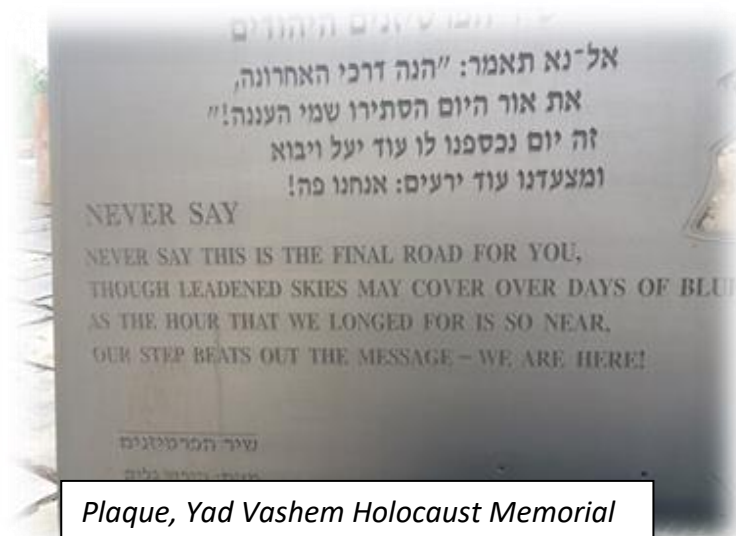
Yet that was not where the story ended; if it was then all those who have suffered for doing the right thing, including Jesus, would have suffered in vain. It is the resurrection that points us to a hope that takes us beyond such things as fiery furnaces to the righting of all wrongs and injustices as God’s kingdom of love, peace and fullness of life prevails. The writer of Hebrews has a vision of Christ at the right hand of God and exhorts us to ‘not grow weary and lose heart’ (Heb 12 v 3). Whatever difficulties, contradictions and costly decision making we may have to endure, our living hope is focused on an inheritance that, as Peter puts it, ‘can never perish, spoil or fade, (1 Peter 1 v 4).

Questions: Have you ever experienced conflict at work or in any other context between what you have asked to do and what you knew to be right? How did you resolve the dilemma?

Prayer: Lord, guide us when we have difficult decisions to make and need to know the right course of action. Give us the strength to do what we know is right and to be the people you want us to be. Amen.

Sunday March 7th: Esther: [‘Esther 5:1-8; 7:1-8](#) : ‘If it pleases the king.’

Esther is notably one of only two books of the Bible not to contain a single mention of God (the other being the Song of Songs). In many biblical stories God is centre stage, intervening miraculously to demonstrate his greatness and liberate his people. Whether it's parting the sea or sending down fire on the mountain, specific and often miraculous divine interruptions dot the narrative. But there is none of that in the book of Esther. Hadassah, also known as Esther, was a member of the Jewish diaspora living in Persia somewhere around the middle of the 5th century BCE. When this story was set, long after Jews had been permitted to return from exile, significant numbers of Jewish communities continued to exist around the Persian Empire.



However, Esther and her people had not lost their distinctive Jewish identity and her story revolves around a problem that is still with us today – anti-Semitism. There is much about the background to this story that is actually pretty repulsive. The sixth month long celebration of the king's wealth followed by a seven-day booze up

reflects a society marked by ostentation and over indulgence. The treatment of women reflected here, which included statutory rape by the emperor Xerxes as a means of selecting a new wife (2 v 12-14), is quite appalling. The planned liquidation of the Jewish community proposed by the senior royal official Haman fills us with horror; his plan to use their money to fill the royal coffers (waved airily aside by the king as he hands the Jews over to Haman and his death squads) echoes chilling images of the Holocaust. In this society the king has absolute power; he can get drunk as often as he likes, bed as many young girls as he wants and kill as many people as he wants without compunction.

As Esther and her relative Mordecai hatch a plan to save the Jewish community there are no big miracles in evidence, nor is there any confessing of sin and turning back to God. There is actually very little prayer and worship at all in this book (although the fasting Esther orders in 4 v 15-16 could be interpreted as a way of turning to God to offer the situation to him). This is about how people in

a very desperate and dangerous situation think quickly, take the initiative and undertake major risks to find a way to survive.

This brings us to our two passages for today. When the dreadful edict is issued Esther is instructed to make a personal appeal to the king as the only way to give her people any chance of avoiding annihilation. But the stakes are high; the almost universal penalty for anyone who approached the king unsummoned was death (4 v 11). We can only guess at her feelings as she stands unbidden before the king and at the depth of her relief as he holds out the golden sceptre meaning that, against the odds, her life will be spared and her request considered (5 v 1-2).

Because Esther was prepared to stick her neck out (almost literally) the king's edict is cancelled and the Jews are spared (as the second passage for today relates). Yet, while it is in one sense providential that she was in the right place at the right time, she was only there because she was, in effect, just one of many very young female victims of a king who treated women as little more than sex slaves. There was little chance, in all probability, for her to have taken the kind of moral stance demonstrated by Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. No doubt she would have felt compromised and afraid (her role as the king's wife was precarious as her predecessor Queen Vashti well understood; Esther 1 v 19) and that this was not the life she would have chosen for herself. But she was where she was and she made the most of her situation to be, in effect, the rescuer of her people. In spite of all that had happened to her, deep inside her loyalty remained intact. She was, in more ways than one, a survivor.

There are times when we feel we are not where we wish we were in life. Alongside all the good stuff that we've been involved with and which has shaped our lives, all our stories also contain their fair share of wrong turns, difficult moments and times when we have both been let down by others and let ourselves down. Many of us, in one way or another, have a somewhat chequered past. Yet often unrecognised, God has been walking with us even or especially through the times when life has been challenging for whatever reason. Esther's story assures us that God is with us exactly where we are and as we are today (even if that is not really where we want to be) and waits to offer us new hopes and possibilities.

God never gives up; even though the world has more than its fair shares of inequalities and injustices, God is still offering humanity new possibilities which require us to identify where God is at work and to get involved. We're not asked to sit around waiting for God to pile in with a big miracle. We, like Esther, are asked to discern the times, think on our feet, sometimes take risks and remain loyal to God.

No situation is too bleak and awful for God to be present and at work even when the outcome is not as felicitous as it was for the Jews of Esther's time. The following prayer was written on a wall anonymously at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during World War Two. It speaks of God's active presence in a hell on earth and bears witness to a beautiful and astonishing ability to forgive in the face of a level of murderous hatred that resulted in the death of millions:

'O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us. Remember the fruits we bought, thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this; and, when they come to judgement, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen.'

This, of course, places the revenge that the Jews took (Esther 9 v 5f) against those who had plotted their liquidation in the story of Esther in context; Jesus asks us to love and pray for our enemies rather than destroy them (Mat 5 v 44). As Christians we are, like Esther, trying to be loyal to the truth as we understand it in a culture which is increasingly alien. As Christianity is being inexorably pushed to the margins in our society, we face tough choices as we try to live out our faith as the tide of secularism comes inexorably in. Yet God himself can never be pushed to the margins no matter how it may look. In Ephesians Paul talks of, '...one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph 4 v 6). As in Esther's story he is often a hidden and silent presence in our lives and the life of the world; but he is there all the same to offer us, from exactly where we happen to be in life (whether that be good, bad, indifferent, could be better, could be worse, exhausted by the pandemic etc.), hope and a future.

Questions: Are you where you want to be in life today? What possibilities might God be offering you?

Prayer: Lord, meet us where we are in life and show us the way you want us to go and who you want us to be. Amen.