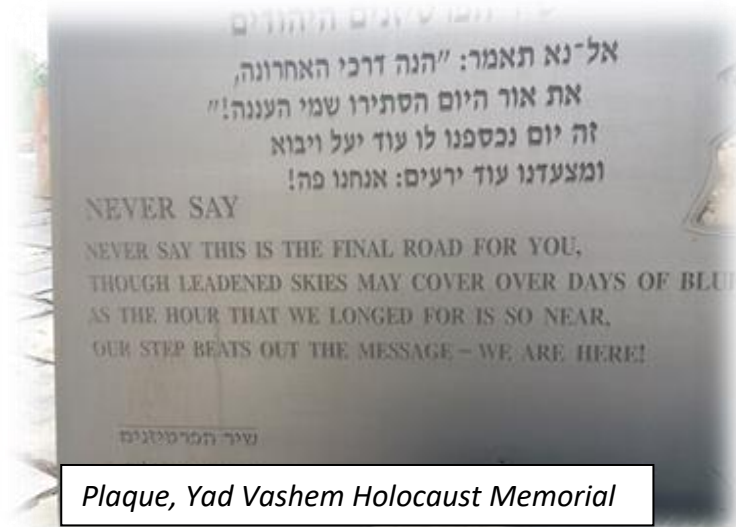


Sunday March 7th: Esther: [‘Esther 5:1-8; 7:1-8: ‘If it pleases the king.’](#)

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.