

Romsey Baptist Church 3rd September 2006 pm Esther 1 & 2

Over the next few weeks we will be looking at the two books in the scriptures named after women – Ruth and Esther, beginning tonight with Esther. Before we read the first two chapters of Esther it would be helpful to put the book into some kind of context.

You will find the book of Esther straight after Nehemiah, but it is set 30 years or so prior to Nehemiah in something like 480 BC. The Jews have been in exile for some time, over 100 years in fact. And the first Jewish exiles have already returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple.

But the story of Esther is firmly set in the exile, with almost everything taking place around the king's palace in Susa, Persia. The exilic setting is reinforced by the title given to one of the key players – Mordecai. He is referred to as Mordecai the Jew. This is unusual, as Jews are normally referred to by their parentage, son of whoever.

In the OT only foreigners were identified by their country or region of origin. For example, Uriah the Hittite. The identification of Mordecai as Mordecai the Jew was a deliberate recognition of the foreign status of both Mordecai and the Jewish people, the author was reminding the readers that they were living as foreigners in a foreign land.

So the key players in the story are of course Esther, her older cousin Mordecai the Jew, who adopted her when her own parents died, the king of Persia Xerxes, and Haman, who we don't meet till next week.

The main plot of the book of Esther is quite a simple one, it is the story of how the Jews living in Persia were saved from utter annihilation at the hand of Haman by the cunning and courage of Esther and Mordecai. Which gives us a clue to one of the two things – apart from Mordecai being Mordecai the Jew, that are unique to the book of Esther.

I wonder if anyone can tell me what they are

1. Only book in bible that doesn't mention God. That has led some people to doubt whether Esther should be in the scriptures – but while God is not mentioned God's presence is clear throughout.

The work of God is seen in two ways – firstly, through a series of unlikely circumstances and extraordinary coincidences. Let me read to you what one bible expert concludes – read word page 323

There are simply so many coincidental events in this story that there can be little doubt that the author of the book –who incidentally is unknown, leaves no room for the reader to conclude anything other than that they are divinely arranged.

Secondly, the hand of God is also seen in the remarkable series of reversals. For example in chapter 9 on the very day that the Jews enemies hoped to triumph over them, the situation was reversed and it was the Jews that triumphed over their enemies.

And while the author never makes the point explicitly, it is clear from the context and language that he uses, in particular the reference to fasting in chapter 4 which is clearly intended to influence the will of God, it is clear that he sees these reversals and extraordinary coincides as the sovereign hand of God at work.

Another bible expert concludes that there is nothing hidden or veiled about the causality of the events in the Esther story; it is indeed unexpressed but it is unmistakable, given the context within which the story is set.

But while there is no doubt that the author wants the reader to see God at work in this story, the author is equally clear about the role that Esther and Mordecai played in saving the Jewish people from annihilation. The deliverance of the Jews was as dependent on the loyalty of Mordecai and the courage, shrewdness and wisdom of Esther as the sovereign hand of God. In this story God is not portrayed as acting independently on human events – parting the red sea etc – but acting through and in partnership with the human players.

We will have much to learn I am sure from the example of Mordecai and Esther.

2. There is also another unique aspect to the book of Esther, I wonder if anyone can tell me what that is – I didn't know this until Thursday.

Every other piece of Jewish literature from the period of the exile and post exilic periods have one single minded objective – to recount the return of the exiled leaders of the Jewish community and the re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Think of Nehemiah – he was a high standing official in the Persian court, but the whole of his story centres on the re-establishment of Jerusalem to which he returned. Daniel, again served in captivity but his focus was the continuation of the Jewish people in Palestine – Daniel for example faces to Jerusalem when he prays.

The book of Esther is unique in that it stands in stark contrast to this focus. There is never any concern over Jerusalem or the Temple, and there isn't a single word addressed to the Palestinian community. The book of Esther is uniquely concerned with the lives of the Jews living in exile, in Persia.

Which leads us to our final words of introduction before we read the first part of the story – the main purpose of the story of Esther - it seems that Esther was written to provide the Jews living in the exile an example of God's saving activity within the context of the exile, rather than as a promise of rescue from the exile. Esther was a book of encouragement and hope for those Jews that did not return to Jerusalem but continued to seek to worship their God as foreigners in a foreign land.

So, let's listen to the first act of the story, chapters 1 & 2.

The first Act of the story can be broken down into 3 scenes, scene 1, verses 1 to 22, the disposal of the old Queen, Queen Vashti, scene 2, chapter 2 verses 1 to 18, the appointment of Esther as the new Queen, and scene 3, verses 19 to 23, the discovery of the plot to kill the king by Mordecai.

And in this first Act the Author is setting the scene for the main plot – he is providing the background information, introducing us to 3 of the four main actors and manoeuvring them into their starting positions for main part of the story.

But, for an introduction it is exceedingly long – the facts could have been communicated far more succinctly, so clearly the author wishes to state more than the basic facts. In providing the amount of detail that he does, the author uses this introduction to set the tone and temper of his story. Rather than simply pass on the fact that the story begins in the time of Xerxes, who threw 2 banquets, the author paints a picture for us of the kind of king Xerxes was and the kind of kingdom he ruled over.

And the picture that is painted is far from complementary – the tone of the author which is less clear admittedly in the English translation, is mocking, satirical – portraying the behaviour of the king and his court as grandiose, lavishly excessive. Verses 6 to 8 with their unnecessary details about the banquet decorations express the wonder and amazement the author wishes his readers to feel at such magnificence and luxury. The author intended to convey his shock, disapproval, amazement at such lavish excess.

And in stark contrast to this is the description of the behaviour of the Queen. She too threw a party – but there are no accompanying statements of extravagance, gaudy decorations, gold goblets filled with free flowing wine. The author paints the Queen with decorum and decency. And with this stark contrast between the festivities of the king and the queen he has set the scene for the comedy that is about to transpire between them.

And again the author, rather than provide the necessary facts embellishes the story as he continues to mock the Persian King and court. The author paints for us a picture of the world's most powerful man who was unable to bend the will of his wife. Under the influence of wine he enters into a battle of wills with his wife and loses in dramatic fashion when she refuses to be shown off to the drunken crowd as some kind of living ornament to match the other beautiful ornaments at the banquet.

The king, unable to handle this situation calls on his closest counsellors for advice – elevating a domestic squabble to the level of a state matter – Their response shows that they were not particularly wise after all and follow the king's lead in blowing the whole thing out of all proportion.

And in an ironic twist, their solution decrees for Queen Vashti what she had already decided for herself, that she didn't want to have anything to do with her drunken idiot of a husband. And their edict that demanded that wives should respect husbands would also have had exactly the opposite effect that the so-called wise men desired and rather than quash the rumour that the King had been put in his place by his wife they would have spread it to the far ends of the kingdom.

But in this opening scene the author not only mocks the Persian court and king, he has a more serious point to make as well. He underscores the point that the Persian empire is ruled inexorably by law, a law that once issues can't be changed, but a law that is incapable of bringing stability of justice because it is a law that is dependent on the will and whim of a weak and unstable dictator who seems to care about little else than his pride and personal pleasure. As such it is a world that cannot be trusted.

As such the author alerts the readers to the potential dangers that are to come, and while there is no hint of anti-Semitism on the part of the king, he is not portrayed as inherently evil, the fact that he is so impulsive, and can be so easily influenced makes the readers aware that the Jews were living in a dangerous society.

In some ways the world we live in is very similar. It is a world of excess and lavish luxury. Think of the Beckham's pre World cup party. We should remember to keep a satirical perspective on this world as our author did on his, and not be sucked into believing that it is normal or acceptable.

It is a world where we as Christians are very much foreigners. Our home is not in this world.

And it is a dangerous world. It is a world run by law but a law that could so easily be used against us. The religious hatred law could so easily be used to prevent Christians preaching the gospel, already in academia Christian views of the world are strongly opposed. Our moral views are under attack as well – with equal opportunity law causing havoc. Several Christian Unions have been thrown out of the SU for their views on homosexuality and One Christian Union was thrown out of the Students Union because the post of President wasn't open to non Christians.

We should be aware that the law could so easily be turned against us – we could so easily become a persecuted people, robbed of the freedom to openly hold Christian beliefs. And so we should be on our guard, not become complacent.

Back in Esther, the author's parody of the Persian king and his court continued into the next scene as the king remembers Vashti, short hand for sobers up and realises what an idiot he has been because she wasn't that bad really. Again he is advised on what action to take, advice which is not wise or forward thinking. Rather than seek to strengthen his empire by marrying wisely, a search is made for the most attractive girl in the empire.

We are told of the frivolously extravagant and shallow beauty treatments that the potential queens have to endure before they are allowed into the king's presence – and we are told by inference that the basis for the king's choice will include not only how beautiful they are but how good they are in bed. The potential queens were taken to the king in the evening and would return to the Harem in the morning and would not return unless the king was pleased with her.

Again the author is mocking the sensual and sexual excess of the Persian world and carnal self-indulgence of the King. How could any right-minded Monarch choose his queen on the basis of their beauty and sexual prowess?

Again we should be encouraged to keep a satirical eye on the value our world places on looks and sexual prowess. Like the author we should look beyond the shallow and superficial and be critical of those who do not.

But in this second scene we are also introduced to Esther and we see for the first time the hand of God at work in the story. In a series of events that are seemingly outside of her or her guardian's control, Esther because she is a beautiful woman, is taken to the Palace to begin beauty treatments. Thus by the hand of God she is in the right place to be chosen as the next Queen.

And while there we are told that she won the favour of everyone who saw her. Not only was she beautiful but she was pleasant as well. People liked her. Sometimes beautiful people are not so beautiful on the inside, but seemingly she was. And she was wise as well. Verse 15, when it was her turn to go to the king she took the advice of the Hegai who was in charge of the king's harem, who would know more than anyone else what the king would like. Esther was no blond bimbo.

And in verse 17 we are told that she won the king's approval more than any of the other virgins and thus was appointed Queen.

And so we have an example of the hand of God at work through the life of Esther, and the partnership of Esther working with God, using her initiation and wisdom to make the most of the opportunity given her by God. This is a theme that will run throughout the story.

Then very briefly we have the third and final scene of act one, the discovery of the plot to assassinate the king by Mordecai, Esther's guardian. And in these brief verses the scene is set for the retelling of the story proper. We are told of the continuing relationship between Esther and her guardian, despite being Queen she still looks to Mordecai for fatherly advice. And so it is perfectly natural for Mordecai to pass on the information he has overheard to Esther who informs the king thus saving his life.

And so as the final piece of information needed before the story proper can begin is set in place - we are told that Mordecai is unrewarded for his service to the king. This was a serious oversight by the king, but it prepared the way for what will happen in chapter six, and set the scene for the king's willingness to rectify his omission.

So at the end of the Act we see another example of the hand of God, events are divinely ordered so that the will of God will be unfolded later on in the story.

And like all good serialisations we are going to have to come back next week to find out what happens next!!