

Romsey Baptist Church 10th September 2006 pm Esther 3

Last week we were introduced to 3 of the 4 main characters in this story. Esther, who through the sovereign hand of God at work through a series of events and her own wisdom and pleasing character, became Queen of Persia.

Her new husband, King Xerxes, whom the author painted in a poor light, a shallow man, concerned with his own status and image, who indulged in lavish excess, and seemingly had little backbone and was easily swayed by his advisors.

And Mordecai, Esther's cousin and adoptive Father. He was loyal and loving, and a picture of an ideal Jew.

And the story ended last week with him discovering a plot to have his new Son in law assassinated, which through his and Esther's intervention was foiled – and although the King was informed of Mordecai's part, he was unrewarded.

This morning we are introduced to the fourth main character in the story, Haman. And we are told that some time after these previous events, King Xerxes promoted Haman to the highest place in the empire. The author gives no indication why Haman deserved this position, and that is not essential to the story – what is essential is that the king ordered that everyone bow before him and give him honour.

And in verse 2 we are told that Mordecai wouldn't kneel down and give him honour. In the absence of any explicit reason for Mordecai's decision a number of possible reasons have been suggested – Some people have suggested that Mordecai refused to bow before Haman because it was against his religion – it would have broken the first and second commandments, it would have been idolatry, giving to a man what was only due to God. There is a similar incident in the book of Daniel of course where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to a image of gold set up by King Nebuchanezzar – even when threatened with a fiery furnace they refused to bow down and worship the image.

But in the OT there are a number of occasions when Jews bowed before royalty, for example 1 sam 24: 8 a story we looked at a couple of weeks ago in our morning service, David has spared Saul's' life when he had an opportunity to kill him and **Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.**

Another suggestion that overcomes that problem is that Haman claimed some kind of divine status, thus to bow to him was breaking the first and second commandments – but that is pure speculation. Another suggestion is that Mordecai was simply motivated by selfish pride – but that doesn't fit with the way that he is portrayed throughout the book by the author, as the role model Jew that other Jews would do well to follow.

So, if we are not going to go with those suggestions, what other reason might there be for Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman. I think that we are given the reason in verse 1. When we are introduced to Haman, he is introduced as Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite.

For those of you who are red hot on your OT History, you will know that Agag from which Agagite is derived, was the king of the Amalekites who was defeated by Saul and killed by Samuel – that story is told in 1 Sam 15. And throughout the OT, we are told of the bitter and unrelenting enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites - who were regarded as the number one enemy of the Jews. So for example in Exodus 17 after the Amalekites had attacked the Jews in the wilderness, we are told that **Ex 17:16 The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."**

The author in identifying Haman as a decedent of Agag and thus an Amalekite, has told us by implication why Mordecai wouldn't bow down. There was no way that Mordecai the Jew, remember that is how he is known in this story, was going to bow before Haman the Agagite, a descendent of the Amalekites, the age old enemy of the Jews.

But the hostility that Mordecai felt towards Haman the Agagite, was nothing compared to the hatred that Haman felt towards Mordecai. When he heard that Mordecai was refusing to honour him and bow before him, Haman was predictably enraged, but his response was not simply motivated by pride and vanity, because in hearing that Mordecai was a Jew he scorned the idea of only killing Mordecai – he set his sights much higher – he would destroy all of Mordecais' people throughout the whole of the kingdom.

Haman was motivated by a deep seated and senseless bitter racial hatred of the Jews.

The blunt and almost casual way the author records Haman's decision to exterminate all the Jews suggests that it was made without hesitation or even a twinge of conscience. And thus Haman is portrayed as a man devoid of mercy or compassion, he is epitome of callous, unyielding and senseless evil.

One of the saddest things for me as I read this story, is that similar things happen even today. Ethnic cleansing and Genocide are as much if not more a sign of our times than the time of Esther. Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan, Iraq, Palestine, countless millions of people murdered because they belonged to the wrong tribe.

And at house group I was reminded this week about how it starts. It is unlikely that any of us here have been involved in Genocide, but all of us at one time or another have probably rejected or excluded someone because of a label that we have given them. And I was challenged to think again about the motivation for attaching labels to people, Chavs, skaters, Goths, Townies, northerners, southerners, working class, middle class, black, white, Asian, Muslim, immigrant, asylum seeker, homosexual.

Why do we create and use these labels, what significance do we attach to them, how do we feel about the people we label as Chav's. Do we love them as much as the kids in our church? If not, what is going on there?

I think because Rome is so not multicultural we need to be even more aware about how we react to these kind of issues. We need to check our attitudes to make sure we are not going down the path of Haman towards senseless hatred.

Then back in Esther, the location changed and we move into scene two of the act. After Haman, through the use of lots determined the best day to carry out his plans – Haman went to the king to get permission for his insane plan, and in doing so showed himself to be a cunning and shrewd slanderer.

He began by suppressing the identity of the Jews, there is a certain people, also implying their insignificance, yet they are dispersed and scattered or more accurately unassimilated throughout the empire. This is true but was equally true about every other people group in the empire, which created a diversity upon which the Persian's were proud. Haman turns it into a problem, implying that these people with their different social and religious customs were somehow sinister.

And from innuendo Haman moved on to outright lies, and they do not obey our laws. The actions of the Jews as a people throughout this book are thoroughly law abiding. And of course we should not forget that only in the last scene Mordecai the Jew, proved his loyalty to the crown by passing on the information that prevented the king from being assassinated. A point that will prove decisive later in our story.

Haman concluded his case by summing up that it was simply not in the best interests of the king to have these unnamed, omnipresent and lawless people living within the empire. And to make sure that the King would agree, before the king could speak he appealed to the king's vanity and greed with an enormous bribe. If the king will issue a decree that they be destroyed, I will put 10,000 talents of silver into the royal coffers, a figure so large (almost the same as the yearly income from the whole empire) that it must be over exaggeration – the author again having his little dig at the king's liking for lavish excess.

And in verse 10 Xerxes responds to Haman's' incredible proposal without asking a single question about this plan, he simply handed over his signet ring to Haman son of Hamendatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews, which allowed him to act fully in the king's name and with his authority, with a casual and offhand comment, do with the money and the people as you please.

His response indicated that he isn't actually that bothered either way, he doesn't share the passion of Haman, he doesn't panic and insist that a plan is devised immediately to rid the empire of such a serious and sinister threat – his response implied that to be honest this situation was too insignificant a concern to occupy his time or attention.

Haman is portrayed as unmitigated evil, but the king is portrayed as dangerously indifferent.

And this is a stark reminder that indifference to evil, inaction to prevent evil, failure to stand up against evil is almost as bad as the evil itself. How does that famous proverb go, the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do.

Not that anyone in this case would go as far as to describe Xerxes as a good man, but his indifference in the face of sheer calculated, unrestrained evil, was inexcusable.

And I wonder sometimes if we are in danger of becoming a people who are indifferent. Because we are bombarded with so many images of injustice we learn how to filter them out to stop ourselves being overwhelmed.

Occasionally a story will lead to a response, the wave of feeling for example that the famine in Africa in 1984 caused, a similar response perhaps to the Tsunami a couple of years ago. But in the main have we learnt to shrug our shoulders and carry on.

Are we indifferent to the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza for example – *read article from Independent.*

When we read that story what do we do – shrug our shoulders and say let Israel do what they want with the Palestinians – it is too insignificant, too far away for me to concern myself with.

Perhaps we want to respond but don't know how, well for one we can put pen to paper and ask our government what they are going to do about it – at the very least we can ask questions about our governments handling of the whole middle east situation.

It may not seem like much but as we saw with the whole Trade Justice and drop the debt campaign, the government is influenced by people who are willing to stand up and make a noise, so at the very least lets stand up and make a noise.

So, having got the green light due to the indifference of Xerxes, Haman began to put his evil plan into action.

Instructions were written to all major divisions of the empire, so that everyone in the empire should know of the Kings decree to utterly annihilate the Jews. And as this law was published the full horror of Haman's plan was revealed. The genocide wasn't going to be conducted by the army, it would be the duty of all the people in the empire to make sure that Haman's plan, issued with the Kings legally binding authority, was implemented. And as a little incentive, they would be permitted to plunder the Jews goods.

And this genocide wouldn't take place for a whole 11 months, which must have been utter torture for the Jews, because there was no means of escape for them, the Persian Empire stretched as far as the known world, there was simply nowhere to go to escape the coming slaughter.

And those 11 months would also provide enough time to arouse plenty of anti Jewish feeling, and plan for the attack.

And so, what the author had warned us about in the opening scene, the inability of the law to provide stability and security for the Jews because it was at the whim of a fickle and easily influenced self obsessed King, had come true. The law had been manipulated to legalise, indeed enforce the genocide of the Jews.

With the plans in place, the King and Haman calmly and casually sat down for a drink seemingly indifferent to the fact that between them they had sealed the extinction of the Jews.

But of course, there is one piece of information that we the readers are in possession of that Haman and the King are blissfully ignorant of – Queen Esther is a Jew and like the rest of her people had been marked for slaughterer. Whether she can rescue herself and her people from this seemingly impossible situation is the subject of the rest of the story and you will need to come back in two weeks time when Julie is preaching to see what she does.