



Churches 4 All

Whimble - Talaton
Clyst Hydon - Clyst St Lawrence

Sermon series on 'Women in the Bible'

Week 6: Esther – an unlikely Queen

(Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 & 9:20-22)

Esther is a really interesting book of the Bible and is of course named after its main character...Esther.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story, Esther is a Jewish orphan living in Persia. She is in Persia as a result of the exile of God's people to Babylon in the 6th century BC (the Persians took over from the Babylonians). She has a faithful and devout Jewish uncle, called Mordecai, and he had taken her as his own daughter when Esther's father and mother died. Esther becomes the wife of the King (Xerxes) because 'she had a lovely figure and was beautiful' (2:7). But, key fact in the plot, very few people know she is Jewish.

Now, as you'd expect in any great story, there is a bad guy! In this story he's called Haman. Haman is one of the King's assistants (a sort of viceroy). Haman is really up himself. All the royal officials at the king's gate are required to kneel down and pay honour to Haman. But there is one person who won't bow down, and that's Mordecai, Esther's uncle. Haman knows Mordecai is Jewish but, remember, he doesn't realise that Queen Esther is Jewish.

I'm sure you can see where this story is headed. Haman is enraged that Mordecai won't bow down to him and so Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. Haman goes to the king and says, "*There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. ⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them....*" And Haman even offers to pay the king to agree. And the king, not realising that his queen is of the people Haman is talking about wiping out, agrees to the idea because he trusts Haman as one of his chief assistants.

So, Haman begins to put into place his plan to annihilate the Jewish people from the kingdom. Cue Eastenders theme tune.

When the Jews learn of the plot there is obviously much distress and Mordecai, Queen Esther's uncle, gets a message to her to say, you've got to help us. You've got to stop the king from allowing this. But Esther goes back to her Uncle Mordecai with a message saying that if anyone approaches the king without being summoned, the king has but one law: which is that they be put to death, unless the king extends the gold sceptre to them and spares their lives. Mordecai reminds Esther that, once they find out she's Jewish too, she'll die anyway, according to the king's decree. So, what has she got to lose?

What does she do? Well, to cut a long story short, she finds the courage to approach the king and asks that he spare her life and the lives of her people, the Jews. And Haman, the bad guy, gets his comeuppance; he is impaled on the pole he had set up to impale Mordecai.

The book of Esther is a stirring tale of an unlikely queen, a murderous enemy and a miraculous turnaround. What does it mean for us today?

Two things:

The first concerns the **sovereignty and faithfulness of God**: Esther is the only book in the Bible not to mention the name of God. There is no reference to God whatsoever in the book. And yet, God is very obviously present, orchestrating events to prevent the destruction of God's people. The sovereignty and faithfulness of God permeate each scene. Is anything truly coincidental? Was it chance that, of the many hundreds of candidates, the king chose Esther as his bride?

When events seemed out of control to Esther and Mordecai, when the king dictated ruin for their people, when evil was poised to triumph . . . God was at work. God works through our obedience and even through our dis-obedience. God works through our successes and our failures. God is sovereign even when life doesn't make sense. Sometimes life doesn't work out as we hope it might; but ultimately, God is faithful, in control, and will not allow our complete destruction. Let the book of Esther encourage us that God is always present and weaves all events for His glory . . . and for our good.

The second thing the book of Esther teaches us is about **Community**: The Jewish feast of Purim commemorates the story of Esther every year. It's a time when Jews get together in community, with ritual, food, wine and laughter, to celebrate the way God preserved the community of his people. It is reminder that salvation takes place in community, and that means resisting the western fascination with individualism which has permeated our society. We are encouraged these days to only see ourselves as individuals, as unique as snowflakes and fingerprints. But you don't have to back the camera up too far before you realise that snowflakes and fingerprints all look pretty much the same.

This is one of the reasons why big sporting events like World Cups have such a positive impact on a nation. They give us something in common, something to unite around, and something to share together and, in doing so, they remind us that we are not just individuals but part of one community. Christian people surely get this – we say the same liturgy together week by week, a liturgy shared across the world; we drink from the same cup, in communion with each other and all those who have drunk from it before us and who will drink from it after us. We understand community. Wholeness involves not being separated from a faith community.

So, in the book of Esther, God teaches us that, through this unlikely and courageous queen, a murderous enemy and a miraculous turnaround, firstly God is faithful and is sovereign; we can trust that God is in control even when life doesn't make sense to us and even when all talk of God is absent. God is still working his purpose out, for his glory and for our good. And this book reminds us too that we are made to be in Community; that we find our uniqueness in community with others; that our salvation is worked out in community.

Chris Martin, July 2018