

Sermon 26 September 2021 – Mark 9:38-end, Esther 7:1-6,9,10; 9:20-22  
Lessons from a Persian Queen

One of the joys of preparing a talk like this is that you find connections between our lives and the lives of those who lived in ancient times. Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise, but who would have thought that the story of a Persian Queen two and a half thousand years ago, would have something to say about the climate crisis today.

We have only heard a short part of Esther's story, the critical point when we learn that the Jewish people are saved from annihilation. In my talk I have drawn from the whole story. If you have never read this as a book, I urge you to do so. It is only 10 pages long in my bible, yet it has all the twists and turns of a Hollywood blockbuster.

A Jewish girl in exile finds favour with the King of Persia who makes her his Queen. There was much enmity between the Jewish people and the Persians and Esther keeps her heritage hidden only revealing it, as we heard in the reading, when there is a threat to her race. Haman, the first minister, develops a particular dislike of the Jewish people and convinces the king that they should all be slaughtered. On learning of the plot, Esther approaches the king, despite risk to herself, and exposes the injustice. The tables are turned, and it is Haman and his followers who face the wrath of the king. This is a book of its time. If you want to reflect on the place of women in society or the rights and wrongs of retribution, this is not the place to look. But as an example of how to "do the right thing" in difficult circumstances there is much we can learn.

There is no reference to God in the book of Esther. The Jewish characters in the story are those who remained in Persia, despite a decree allowing some to return to Jerusalem. It has been suggested that these were the people comfortably assimilated into Persian culture, rather than the committed, pioneering resettlers. Perhaps, for them, God felt a little distant. Despite this, or maybe because of it, the story is described as an expression of faith in the "invisible working of an invisible God behind the scenes of human events". Certainly, when you look at the story in detail, you can see events and situations develop at just the right time to move the story onward. God works for his people and through his people today, just as he did at the time of the exile.

In the Climate Crisis we are faced with a threat that could change lives and wipe out whole communities. Like Esther, we can be confident that God is working for the good of his people and challenged that we, as God's people have a role to play and so like Esther, we must take action. In Esther the threat was to one race and fixed on one event at a set time. The threat to the planet today is much more complex, but here are a few ideas which might encourage us.

### **Be Informed**

Esther, sheltered in the palace, heard that the people were lamenting and sent trusted servants to her relative Mordecai to find out the facts. Mordecai had raised her and was known to be a Godly man. She valued his opinions and advice.

The Eco Committee has been gathering information on what people in this church are doing to play their part in the environmental crisis. I have had lots of conversations over the last

week or so, including how we might save energy and protect the planet to curb the threat of global warming.

I have learnt how people are thinking about how they heat their houses, at least one member of the congregation gets up early to turn on her hot water to benefit from cheaper overnight rates without having to have the heating on all night. I have been reminded that we don't always need fancy products with high production costs, often traditional methods work just as well such as using bicarbonate of soda and vinegar or lemons, to clean. I have been inspired by those taking bold steps and encouraged by those just making minor changes. Just having the conversations has made me think more about these issues and, in some cases directed me to sources of help and guidance.

### **Build Relationships**

Esther's relationship with Mordecai gave her a valued and trusted ally but it was Esther's good relationship with the king which saved her life.

Other relationships are important in the book too. Earlier in the book, Mordecai had come to the King's attention when he foiled a plot to assassinate him. This made it even more abhorrent to the king when he learned that Haman intended to kill Mordecai.

The publicity for the COP 26 Climate change conference stresses the need to work together to find solutions. The summit itself is a bringing together of world leaders, but their website tells us that the organisers will work with businesses, civil society groups, schools and people across the UK as part of a conversation on tackling climate change. Bristol City Council is working with other organisations, such as Solar Together, to achieve its climate goals. This is a scheme to encourage bulk buying of solar panels for houses in the area. The Climate Crisis is not something anyone or even any one country, can deal with alone, relationships are vital to bring about change.

### **Pray**

We need help from each other, but of course we also need help from God. On discovering the plot against the Jews, the first thing Esther did was to pray and ask others to pray for her too. Mordecai had told her that she was in a unique position to put right this wrong. She alone could approach the king and expose Haman. Esther faced a huge risk just in exposing herself as a Jew. Further, for coming into the king's presence without being summoned, the penalty was death. Esther was unwilling to continue without God's support.

The threat we face is not as immediate nor as personal as that faced by Esther and her people and solutions are not as simple. We cannot resolve this alone, but we each need to work out what we can and should do. Mordecai said, "Maybe you have been made Queen for just this purpose". We hear all the time that everyone has a part to play in saving the planet. What role does God have for you? What special place do you find yourself in? What skills has God given you that might help?

Faced with lists of things we can do; how do we know what is practical and realistic for us? Where can we make sacrifices? How do we negotiate the science? How do we determine the facts from the fiction?

So many questions. God is working behind the scenes of human events so we cannot manage this without God's help and guidance.

### **Be bold**

Last week, Kandis encouraged us to become influencers. Rooting ourselves in faith and scripture and showing the world what it means to be a Christian. Esther shows us how the most unlikely people can find themselves in a position of power and influence.

Esther was an exile, a woman confined within the king's palace subject to the king's whims (the previous Queen had been banished for not coming to see him when he requested her presence), yet Esther was given the power to influence the king and through him the fate of her people.

Her bravery and persistence can be contrasted with the actions of those in more obvious positions of power. The king, easily swayed by the will of those around him and Haman, who uses his power to make people bow down to him and is more concerned with promoting himself than the welfare of those he leads.

For most of us, access to world leaders may be limited to influence through campaigns, petitions or protest. We can however influence friends and neighbours by talking about and sharing the things we do. I stress that this is not a call for us all to become eco warriors, although that may be right for some. We are all at different stages of life, we have different personal circumstances, so just take a moment to ask God what he is calling you to do today. Can you share something through our 50 ways project? Can you encourage or advise others in the community?

Remember, "You are not here by accident" God is working for his people today, just as he did in ancient Persia. Mordecai said to Esther, "Maybe you have been made Queen just for this purpose." What is his purpose for you? Are you ready to play your part?

I have left some pens and post-it notes by the display for you to add any comments or suggestions you have about how we are responding to the environmental crisis and I will be around over coffee for anyone who wants to talk then. If you feel you have something to contribute, please try and do this before you leave. Those on zoom may be able to put something in the chat. I will pass your thoughts to the eco committee for sharing.

### **Prayer**

Lord God,

We are facing troubling and uncertain times. Help us to play our part, reducing carbon emissions and encouraging others to do the same. Guide us as we seek accurate and up to date information, lead us as we communicate and build relationships so that we can act from a position of trust and encourage us to be bold in our actions, ready to make sacrifices and suffer inconveniences for the benefit of mankind.

We ask this in Jesus's name,

Amen