

SERMON: 2018/09/30 (0800) (19th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Esther* 7:1-6,9-10;
9:20-22_BTR

Join with me in grabbing one of the (brown) pew-Bibles near to you.
And turn to page 437, which is where you'll find the little Book of *Esther*.
Now, some of you may have recently become *very* familiar with this, so forgive me for any unintentional repetition; but this 'is a carefully crafted piece of literary genius'[n.1] - a *fascinating* book, and I'm certain that we'll find some more "mileage" in it. [Pause.]

As you turned to find *Esther*, you might've noticed that it is located *before* the enigmatic "Wisdom" literature of Job and the like, and among the *historical* writings of the Old Testament.
It is the last of them, in fact; with good reason:
the events it relates take place *hundreds* of years after the Jews were (first) dragged into exile by the Babylonians - which we hear about at the end of *2 Chronicles*, and 'a generation or two after the Babylonians have, in turn, been overthrown by [another power-hungry group from even further east,] the Persians.'[n.2]
The books that immediately precede it (in the sequence of the "Canon"), *Nehemiah* and *Ezra*, both concern Jews that were, at this late stage, allowed to return home by the new masters - and so they shift the Bible's geographical centre of interest back to it's traditional place - on the "Holy Land," Canaan-Israel; but *Esther* is about those who chose to remain abroad - as most did, actually: for they had become a very important community[n.3] - so important that they would go on to form their own large state, the "Khazars," but this was still in the distant future.[n.4]

Now, their rise in this foreign land, as outsiders, threatened some of the *native* stakeholders, like this fellow we hear about called, 'Haman' - a palace official in the imperial capital,[3:1] 'Susa',[n.5][1:2] mentioned at the very beginning of today's excerpt.
And he hatched a conspiracy against them - a *genocide*: 'to destroy *all* the Jews'.[3:6]

A young Jewish lady, however - the one after whom our tale is titled - "rumbles" the plot, and outwits him.
In a sort of primitive Miss America pageant - although, in this case, ancient Iran - she was "scouted" to be the new wife of the emperor, Ahasuerus.

(He had recently divorced.)

And, using her new found lofty status, persuades her husband, as we see, to have Haman executed.
And then there's a party!

A *huge* party.

And it has happened annually since - for almost three millennia: it is called "Purim."

- It is all about giving thanks to God for His goodness.

That's the theme.

Showing gratitude to the creator.

And, as such, I think *Esther* challenges us.

I think it challenges us because I think most of us, probably, are lousy at saying "Thank you!" to God, and living lives that, at every moment, demonstrate our appreciation of Him and His mercies and glory.

"*But wait!*" You might say.

"All that *Esther* shows us is to be thankful (to God) when really, *really* good things happen - like averting a massive national catastrophe - nothing more."

And yet I disagree:

we must be careful to accurately appreciate *Esther's* position:

We might think to ourselves:

"*Yes!* This is brilliant:

Ordinary but pretty girl-next-door - an orphan, in fact - becomes a princess - *the* princess over the world's *largest* kingdom.

It's almost like 'Cinderella!'"

Right?

A Disney movie.

And so we hear in the book that there was 'great wealth' all around her,[1:4] 'splendour and pomp'[v.4]; of 'banquet[s] lasting [weeks on end]';[v.5] of 'silver', 'marble' and 'gold';[v.6] of 'mother-of-pearl, and [other, *precious*] colored stones.'[v.6]

Of 'royal wine' being 'lavished' on the courtiers in ornate goblets 'without restraint'.[v.7-8]

We hear, *many* times, that they were served - and "serviced" - by eunuchs and concubines 24/7:

[1:10,12,15; 2:3,14,15,21; 4:4].

We hear that she was pampered with extended 'cosmetic treatments': [2:3, 9, 12].

And given sumptuous 'gifts' too: [2:18].

And it all sounds so dream-like.

A *Barbie's* paradise.

Indeed, one could go even further: are her circumstances comparable to *Heaven*?

Wine and rare, exotic jewels are both pervasive symbols in the Old Testament of the Kingdom for which we Christians long, after all.

But notice too, in chapter 3, verse 10, that the one reigning over all this jollity and luxury - Ahasuerus - is a drunk - and a mean one at that.[n.6]

Our author, kindly, *graciously*, uses the euphemism 'merry':[1:10]

And, when he got like this, he became both 'enraged' - that's verse 12 - and "horny:"

Queen Esther, you see, attained her position when her predecessor refused to be paraded in front of some distinguished guests like a prize-winning cow at the County Fair.

The king - seemingly an unashamed misogynist - hoped 'to show the peoples and the officials her beauty'; [1:11] that is, *all* of it: she was instructed to wear *only* her crown.[n.6]

Esther's new position, in other words, is, to put it lightly, very 'unenviable'.[n.7]

She was a caged bird.

One that had to have regular sex with a husband she didn't choose, whose interest in and concern for her might evaporate at *any* moment and be switched to some other, *younger* woman:

The first queen simply 'vanishes from the text'[n.8] - hopefully only sent off to whatever the equivalent in the Persian world was for the nunnery in Medieval England: a dumping ground for widows and faded beauties.

But, possibly, she was tortured, mutilated and her body dumped in one of the city's stinking sewers.

We don't know.

We probably don't want to know.

But Esther was now staring into that same fickle "abyss."

All of her troubles *weren't* behind her.

She still had problems.

Her life was *far* from perfect: it was a fragile, politicised predicament.

It seems lovely (from afar), but only as a cut flower in a delicate glass vase.

How long could it last?

But she gives thanks anyway.

Because God is good, whether we're suffering or laughing.

He is good because He has, points out Saint Peter - in his second letter,[1:3] provided *everything* we need to flourish.

In our selfishness, of course, in *this* consumerist culture, we hope for more; *much* more.

But the bare essentials necessary for wholesome, *godly* lives are all around us.

By the Holy Spirit, we need only be 'transformed by the renewing of [our] minds' to see that this is true.

[Rom. 12:2]

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Reid, Debra (2008), *Esther (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 13)*, Nottingham, U. K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 19.
2. Levenson, Jon D. (1997), *Esther: A Commentary*, Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster / John Knox Press, 23.
3. See, of example: Gross, Simcha (18th of February, 2015), 'Pearce and Wunsch, Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia', *Ancient Jew Review*, available at <http://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2015/2/18/pearce-and-wunsch-documents-of-judean-exiles-and-west-semites-in-babylonia-1> (accessed September 28, 2018).
4. See: Foltz, Richard (November 1998), 'Judaism and the Silk Route', *The History Teacher*, Volume 32, No. 1, pp. 9-16, 10-12. See also: Sand, Shlomo (2009), *The Invention of the Jewish People*, London: Verso, 220.
5. Waters, Matt (2014), *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550–330 BCE*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 'The Persian kings had five [capitals], all in the center of the Empire. ...They may have moved...for the climate... Susa or Babylon in the low-lying plains appealed during the winter [for example]...' (p. 135.) But, in the final analysis, 'Susa...[was] a focal point of imperial expression.' (137.) Curtis, John (2013), 'Introduction', in Perrot, Jean (Ed.), *The Palace of Darius at Susa: The Great Royal Residence of Achaemenid Persia*, New York, N. Y.: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., xviii: '[I]t is sometimes suggested that Susa was the main treasury of the Persian Empire.'
6. Levenson (1997), 46: 'Ahasuerus is a spoiled playboy, a person who overindulges in physical pleasures and lacks a moral compass. ... The absence of women at Ahasuerus' banquets enhances the perception that these were really just overdone "stag parties," with all the licentiousness and disrespect the term implies.'
7. Reid (2008), 69-70.
8. *Ibid.*, 20.
9. 69.