

CCSY, 27 September 2009; Stewardship Sunday
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

‘Coming out’

The Book of Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Bible in which there is no mention of God. In God’s place, as it were, on the throne of power, sits an incompetent, self-indulgent, and easily manipulated despot: King Ahasuerus. Because of this and other peculiarities, Esther came perilously close to being omitted from the Jewish and Christian canons of Scripture. I’m one of those who is kind of glad that she snuck in!

As the height of Haman’s gallows suggest, Esther is the ‘tall story’ of how a Jewish orphan became Queen of the Persian Empire at a time when many of her people were living in exile in its provinces, and when Judah itself was under Persian control. Its central character, whose name is a form of the Hebrew verb ‘to hide’, keeps her ethnic identity secret, and manages by equal doses of courage and cunning to avert the threatened genocide of her people as contrived by the arch-villain, Haman, in a chilling passage that we heard read at Evensong last Sunday: ‘There is a certain people scattered ... among the peoples ... of your kingdom’, Haman says of the Jews to King Ahasuerus over a glass of wine one sunny afternoon; ‘their laws are different ... If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver ... into the king’s treasuries.’ (Esth 3:8-9)

As the dramatic tension builds, the excesses of the Persian court are mercilessly parodied, before the Jewish people enjoy a victory of equally absurd proportions over their enemies in the empire. Although not an historical work in any sense we would recognise, the narrative of Esther is a poignant and cathartic – if somewhat light-hearted – response to Israel’s historical experience of exile and persecution. Probably written some twenty-three centuries ago, to read Esther in our own generation – especially in the wake of the Holocaust – is to sense the utter seriousness that is carried by its burlesque flavour and comic charms.

Esther’s rise to power in the court appears as arbitrary as Haman’s. She wins her way through the Grand Final of the royal beauty contest. The king spares no effort in selecting his new Queen (the first having been deposed for refusing to perform the ancient-Near-Eastern equivalent of table-top dancing for the guests at one of his parties). An arduous twelve-month ‘interview’ process follows, during which the king summons one virgin after another to the royal chambers. Esther’s audition goes particularly well, and she is crowned queen.

As one of those almost immediately marked for destruction by the royal decree Haman orchestrates, however, this exiled, Jewish orphan’s careful, deferential playing-out of her public, queenly, Persian role carries the hopes of Jewish self-preservation in the face of the capricious authority of Ahasuerus and the xenophobic insecurity of Haman. As her cousin Mordecai challenges her, ‘Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.’ (Esth 4:14)

How many European Jews in the 1930s – or centuries earlier during the Inquisition – could relate to Esther’s dilemma: when is it safe to come out of the closet? How many Indian students in Melbourne – how many gay and lesbian Anglicans – feel safe and free to be themselves, to publicly ‘own’ their identity?

We pick up the plot in today’s first reading at the point of its resolution: the very moment when Esther reveals to the king that she is one of those who has been sold out. And so she

pleads for her own life, and that of her people, turning the tables on Haman, who – quite literally – gets hoist on his own petard.

But a more terrible irony, perhaps, from which we're spared by the way today's passage has been edited in the lectionary, is that the Jews in this story end up behaving like their Persian oppressors; and many Persians – for fear of the Jews – are described as 'Jewing': taking on the identity of their ethnic 'other' (much as Esther did) for the sake of sheer survival. We get the happy ending: a public holiday and the exchange of gifts; we miss the bit about 75,000 Persians being killed in reprisals – mindful, of course, that the story's end is no less of a pantomime than its beginning.

Watching yesterday's game (the 2009 AFL Grand Final) at the Arcadia across the road, my theory about the tribalism of AFL was confirmed: the footy field is the one place where – tribunal notwithstanding – we can wish the worst upon our enemies, our 'others'. It's only a game, of course ... isn't it?

In the same sort of way we might think of this most 'unbiblical' story as something of a 'limit-case' text: pushing the boundaries of possibility, asking how much the Diaspora Jewish community can bear: to what extent must it either risk, or violently assert, its identity in order to simply survive in a world where God is not about to intervene and sort things out. These are questions which will not go away: for modern-day Israel/Palestine; for ethnic diasporas and minorities the world over; and for the community in which we are set.

In the face of an escalating geo-political cycle of fear and demonisation, and the violence we are witnessing in our own society, and as the Church continues to alienate and wound members of its own body – Christ's body – perhaps, on this Stewardship Sunday, Esther serves as something of a salutary, if darkly playful tale.

Within the web of gifts that is Christian ministry, to use an image of Archbishop Rowan Williams, what is that we bring to exchange with others in the household of faith in response to God's boundless, if at times inscrutable, generosity? What might my role be in just such a time and place as this? What is it that I have to give; and what do I keep hidden for fear of how it might be received? How might God's love and hospitality be made known to me and to others in the truthfulness – the saltiness – of my identity: my baptismal being and becoming? And how can I claim and steward the gift of that identity without it becoming a threat to, or negation of, someone else's?

Today's gospel suggests some fairly drastic measures in these respects, but above all it exhorts us to be salty: to 'come out' into the fullness of who and what we are in him whose name we bear as Christ's Church, and in whose name we serve and season the world God loves.

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