

Sunday 27 September, 2021

A sermon preached by the Revd Stephen Ames, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2021.

Readings: [Esther 7: 1-10; 9:20-22](#)

Our first reading today came from the book of Esther. We rarely have readings from this book, so today I want to speak to you about Esther, about its surprising message and where it has led me.

In preparing this sermon I have been helped by a very scholarly work on Esther by none other than the Bishop of Gippsland, the Rt Reverend Dr Richard Treloar. I refer to his doctoral thesis, published with the title, *Esther and the End of Final Solutions*.

The book of Esther is set in the Persian capital of Susa, in the reign of King Ahasuerus. Scholars debate whether it is in the fifth or the fourth century before Christ. The book is one of many writings after the exile of Jews in Babylon and the return of some Jews to Palestine thanks to Cyrus King of Persia who swept victoriously across the whole ancient near east, including capturing Babylon. Jews were free to return to their homeland but not all did. Nevertheless, all were within the Persian Empire, stretching from India to Ethiopia.

The book consists of an introduction in chapters 1 and 2; the main action in chapters 3 to 9:19; and a conclusion in 9:20–10:3. The plot is structured around banquets, a word that occurs twenty times in Esther and only 24 times in the rest of the Hebrew bible.

This is appropriate given that the book describes the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim celebrated each year and next celebrated on the 16th-17th March next year. That festival itself

is not the subject of the book of Esther. The book's theme, rather, is the reversal of destiny through a sudden and unexpected turn of events: the Jews throughout the Persian empire were destined to be destroyed totally, but instead are saved.

Now before I say more about the story, I want to say something about the text of the book. It has a core written in Hebrew to which has been added several sections in Greek. This is not surprising when you remember the whole of the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, beginning with the first five books in the third century before Christ. Legend has it that 72 scholars, six from each of the 12 tribes of Israel were the translators.

Most English translation of the book of Esther don't distinguish the Hebrew core and the Greek additions. However, the Jerusalem Bible does do this by putting the Greek additions in italics and the Hebrew core in straight form. I mention this because today's reading is drawn from the Hebrew core, chapter 7 verses 1-20, and three verses from one of the Greek additions chapter 9, verses 20-22.

You may be wondering why the Greek additions were made to the Hebrew core of the story of Esther. Is there anything odd about that core that it needed to be supplemented? Perhaps the most striking thing is that the core makes no mention of God. You recall there is one other book from the Hebrew Bible that makes no mention of God. It is the love story in the Song of Songs, but that was never supplemented with additions. So, again you may wonder what is it about God not being mentioned in the Hebrew core of Esther that called for these additions?

The story is full of Jewish humour, but I will give even less than the bare bones. The King of Persia set aside his beautiful wife because she humiliated him in public. He gets a new young, beautiful wife Esther who is a Jewess but does not reveal her identity. Esther was brought to the King's attention by her Jewish uncle Mordecai.

The King's second in command is a man called Haman before whom everyone must bow. Mordecai refuses and Haman learns it is because of his Jewishness. So, with the King's authority Haman orders all the Jews in the Persian Empire to be killed.

Mordecai discovers Haman's plan and implores Esther to intercede with the King. But she is afraid to present herself to the King unsummoned, an offense punishable by death. Also, the King hasn't called for Esther for thirty days. Mordecai urges her saying she won't escape if she does nothing. He says, "who knows if you haven't come to the throne for just such a time as this."

Esther goes to the King who receives her. She invites him and Haman to a feast, during which she asks them to attend a further feast the next evening. At the second feast Esther reveals to them that she is Jewish, and that Haman has ordered all Jews to be exterminated, herself included. Overcome by rage, the King orders Haman hanged on the very gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai.

Unable to annul a formal royal decree, the King instead adds to it, permitting the Jews to join together and destroy any and all of those seeking to kill them, which they do. Mordecai and Esther send letters throughout the provinces instituting an annual commemoration of the Jewish people's redemption, in a holiday called Purim(lots). The King remains very powerful and continues his reign, with Mordecai assuming a prominent position in his court.

That is a brutal summary of the Hebrew core of the Book of Esther, and you may still be wondering why anything had to be added.

Notice God doesn't act to save the Jews in this story as God did in liberating Jews from slavery in Egypt. And notice that the story doesn't mention God, there are no prayers to God, and Mordecai and especially Esther get through the crisis by drawing on their own wits and strengths. They survive and all the Jews in the Empire survive with no thanks to God.

Some of you may be asking, 'Stephen where is this leading?'

My brothers and sisters, I beg you, stay with me.

We can all see why later Jewish Rabbis added prayers to God which are answered by the survival of the Jews. This makes God's presence explicit and so makes the story as retold fit more with the established Jewish view of God and of the Jews as the people of God. Perfectly understandable.

But what scholars like the Bishop of Gippsland have shown us is an earlier version of the story, authored by a Jew in which God plays no part, where the key figures make no mention of God and do not pray. Why was it important for this strange Jewish story to be written in the first place?

Well, it would be important for any individual or group who simply valued the survival of the Jews, whether they believed in God or not. We hear this in the speaking of Holocaust survivors.

We also get a sense of the sheer importance of survival, when we hear First Nations people acclaim the fact that after all, they have survived, and how important to them that this be asserted, acknowledged, and valued by them, and by us. Now we could go through that door but this morning I want you to hold that thought while we open another door.

Some of you may wonder if there isn't some remnant of faith in Mordecai's question to Esther, "Who knows if you haven't come to the throne for a moment such as this?" (4:14) Mordecai has no answer. This unanswered Jewish question is asked in the midst of threats to their survival as they do what they can to avert the threat to kill all the Jews. If there is an answer it is in survival and if God is involved, God is hidden. So, the author is pointing to a way of life lived with such an unanswered question.

I found myself asking if there was a way the Rabbis could have added to the story while keeping its strangeness, rather than hiding its strangeness by absorbing it into the prevailing mainstream of orthodox Jewish practice?

With Bishop Richard's help I think so. For the Rabbis could have drawn attention to the many texts that speak of God hiding God's face. There is Deuteronomy 31:17; Psalms 10.1; 13.1, 27.9, 44.1; 83.1 and Is45.15, which says, "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour." You can see that this theme could be woven around the core of the story of Esther where God is not even mentioned.

You might ask why would God hide God's face? A useful Bible study would be to look at those verses in their contexts and see what they might tell us. But one possibility is that God hides God's face to bring people to reflect on their lives that are going astray in some way.

One answer might be to cause people to grow up spiritually because their dependence on God was mistaken. If you doubt this on the grounds that Jesus said we must receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, recall that St Paul said, "when I was a child I thought like a child, I acted like a child but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Or recall John 6, when Jesus had fed the crowd from the little boy's loaves and fishes, the men wanted to make him King. What did Jesus do? He withdrew.

In Christian spiritual traditions this is called the dark night of the soul, where for a time God hides God's face from the soul on its life journey. Not all Christian traditions take seriously the claim that God hides God's face. For example, this well know hymn.

Great Father of Glory, pure Father of Light
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All laud we would render, O help us to see:
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee.

No, my friends, there is much more to God being hidden than the very convenient claim that it is "only splendour of light hideth thee."

Even more convenient than the claim,

"The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
and ordered their estate."

Now I've heard it suggested that our whole culture is going through a dark night of the soul, where all the previous markers of God's presence, of meaning and value have disappeared or are

disappearing. This is suggesting that God is hiding God's face, from truckloads of people in our culture.

When I say that Esther and Mordecai, don't mention God, don't pray to God, rely entirely on their own wits and resources, am I not describing many, many people in our culture? People from whom God has hidden God's face. Of course, they would say that it is because there is no God.

I think most Christians who worship every day and gather weekly in their churches for worship do not think of God as hiding God's face from them.

If that is so, are we not to use that knowledge to show people without presumption, without being up ourselves, how God is hidden in our daily lives? That is to make the case for God. A person who is doing that publicly is Greg Sheridan a Catholic layman, who is the Foreign Editor for The Australian. Another person who does it is Paul in Chapter 1 of Romans and in Chapter 17 of Acts. And the person who most pointedly makes the case for God is Jesus of Nazareth.

Now you might feel this is not for you. But why not? You may feel you are not Greg Sheridan. Fair enough. But might you be like one of our seniors from the 8am congregation, who told me about her encounter with her hairdresser. While the young woman was cutting her hair and chatting our senior person mentioned she was going to the Cathedral. The young hairdresser said, "Cathedral! God! I don't believe in God, there is no evidence for God." Our person said to me, she wanted to say something, felt that she should, but couldn't and felt she had let the side down. I said very strongly that she hadn't let the side down, the side had let her down. After all her years of coming to church she had not been prepared for such speaking.

You may not be Jesus, or Paul or not even Greg Sheridan, but might you be like our person, and find yourself having to make the case for God. Remember 1 Peter 3:15, "always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." If God's face is not hidden from you, then say your prayers and pay attention to the opportunities that God opens in which through you God's face may start to come into view for someone you are with.

Now you still might feel this is not yet for you. So, let's step back from any one of us and talk about the Cathedral as a community, because I think the Cathedral has the opportunity to make the case for God in addition to any other way it may presently be doing so, and I am referring to its music. This is the other door I want to open.

By any standard the Cathedral is a highly credible example of music making. We are perfectly placed to inquire into whether there is a case for saying God is hidden in human musicality. Maybe for you it is the sheer experience of the beauty, majesty, power, pathos of music that makes the case for God. But not for everyone so moved by music, for example, Stephen Fry. He thinks we won't again get any music of the quality, depth and range of Bach, the deeply devout Christian, because we aren't religious like that anymore. But Stephen Fry insists this makes no case for God.

Think my brothers and sisters, think what it would be like if we could make the case for God being hidden in all human musicality, and that it was strong enough to stand up in public. How good would that be, given how important music is to every human being in every culture. Now I don't want you to think I am a 'book soldier' when it comes to this task of beginning to uncover the hidden face of God in daily life. I have been doing that with regard to human inquiry, especially scientific inquiry, and with regard to the great laws of physics; and with regard to the care of people with dementia. I would begin by asking whether human musicality was an evolutionary extension with some cultural glosses of the remarkable sounds made by birds and whales or in addition did something new come to light in human musicality? And of course, there are scholars and performers of music, who are also practicing Christians, even theologians, who could help us. So may God bless us.

My brothers and sisters, let us be informed by Esther 4:14. Who knows, perhaps our musical tradition at the Cathedral has come to its present excellence for just such a moment as this?