

Courage and Celebration; Wisdom and Faith

Leith Valley, 4 January 2009
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Esther 1:1-3:15 Hebrews 11:39-12:1-2

Why was Esther written? Why is it remembered? What is God's word to us?

When Lynne Baab passed on to me that Richard had invited us to preach on **Esther** during January, for some reason in my head I translated that as **Ruth** – I started thinking about issues of exile and migration, of loyalty, of women who are important in the story of salvation, of accounts of love and intimacy which find their place in Scripture and the purposes of God. Of the political and the personal, and their part in the providential.

However as is sometimes the case with conversations which have a wrong premise at the start, things can go on for quite a while before you wake up that something is wrong!

Yet Esther, like Ruth, **is** about most of those very things. Esther and her people are migrants in a foreign country, Ruth and Esther are both books about strong influential women in situations where men hold power, and they are both stories where a certain amount of wile and patience is needed, where loyalty is a virtue. These are not idle tales. They are stories which at one level seem to have little to do with God, and yet at another have a profound sense of God's interaction with the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people.

Both Esther and Ruth are stories of new beginnings, of hope after dark times, of God's salvation in the lives of individuals and communities, of personal courage and God's larger purposes. They are good stories for New Year. Esther is a book associated with a feasting and celebration of deliverance. These are stories for a time of looking back in gratitude for God's goodness. And for a time of looking ahead. There is an end to fear and anxiety.

For many there are mixed feelings right now. Israel and Gaza seem to have little possibility of hope for anyone, whatever the price in violence and destruction; Obama offers hope of a more engaged America, but Obama is not the Messiah; as the financial recession affects someone near you, if not you yourself, it is good that governments including ours are willing to spend their way out of it, but people still need jobs, business-people still need to make investment decisions, and there is still the mess to clean up. The issues of hurt, betrayal, regret, folly, greed, and loss need spiritual resolution as well as material salvation. We need to know as Christians what we know that others don't yet - about where is God for us at a time like this. Sinners will be saved. Sin will be redeemed. God will have the last word.

Esther's story is set in Persia (Iran) several generations after the exile. The king of Persia, Ahasuerus, is often identified with Xerxes I who ruled from 485-465 BCE. It is not surprising that we don't know when it was written, but it may have been around 400. The Greek translations are 300 years later and expand the story and make it more religious by adding prayers. Esther is not referred to in the New Testament. Jewish rabbis meeting in AD 82 to sort out which books of the OT were in the canon were not sure about including Esther, but retained the shorter Hebrew version despite the absence

of direct reference to God. Jerome in his Latin Vulgate drew on the Greek version. Martin Luther questioned why we have it. We might still ask “What is a book that does not mention God doing in the Bible?”

Of course books in the Bible do not stand on their own. The text from Hebrews is important – those who have gone before are not complete in the faith without those who come after, and neither are we who after them complete in ourselves, and all of us are only fully complete, together, in Christ. Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and the Song of Songs are also sparse in their God-talk or questioning, but they are read alongside others who tell other stories and fill in the teaching.

And like people today, while whether or not religious language is used tells us something about people’s beliefs, it is an unreliable guide to faith. God uses different sorts of people and different sorts of writing to help us be the people we are meant to be. In my own experience one of my wisest relatives never confessed to faith, and someone who puts every detail of life into a spiritual framework makes me uncomfortable. As in the book of Jonah, and even the Gospels, sometimes it is secular friends who bring spiritual wisdom. Often enough we believers cannot produce the Word from the Lord when it is needed.

That Esther does not mention God, does not mean that God does not speak through it. For Jews and in turn for Christians, there was at the end of the day a reluctance to let it go. And it has continued to speak, perhaps in ways which might not have been anticipated.

Esther grew in popularity among Jews in the Middle Ages, especially because it was one of five books (Ruth was another) associated with major feasts, in Esther’s case, Purim, a feast celebrating salvation and deliverance – how the Jews got relief from their enemies. As powerful yet vulnerable minorities through European history and today when Israel is attacked by Hamas and responds with 100-fold violence and destruction, it is not hard to see the relevance of Esther to Jewish communities. If we were reading Esther as part of Purim the tradition is to shout and hiss every time the name of Haman is mentioned so that that his name cannot be heard. It is great drama.

We will have our own views of the rights and wrongs of the terrible impasse in Gaza and Israel in the current uprising. It is not just Jews and Palestinians, think of Hutus and Tutsi’s in Rwanda – one has power, one has numbers, and fear and hatred do their deadly logic.

We too should pray that another way should be found for justice, peace and security for peoples competing for land and water and afraid of what the other might do and unable to forget what they have done; but how does Esther speak to us as Christians?

Christians have seen Esther as a type of the Church protecting the faithful against persecution. Esther also gives permission to speak in praise of female beauty, though I am not sure about beauty contests! Both Queen Vashti and Esther challenge male dominance at great personal risk. The courage of a woman navigating the hazards of Harem life may speak to those in relationships with partners that are difficult.

A Singaporean student at Bible College studied Esther noting the parallels with her own situation as someone who was adopted out and brought up in another family.

There are various retellings of the story. The charming Veggie tales – if you haven't seen these children's videos, they are award winning retelling of biblical stories with vegetables as characters – have one on Esther, where the key theme is Esther's courage. She knows what to do, but needs courage to do the right thing.

Of course there are times when the problem is not our lack of courage, it may be our recklessness, or our lack of clarity about what is the right thing – that is also a common human predicament. Esther may speak to those whose very survival requires street smarts, political skills, diplomacy of a high order. It may also speak to those who have difficulty seeing the connection between their life and the purposes of God.

- What is your perspective in reading the book?
 - Like that student who had been adopted, brought up in another family, taking care about what you have to do to fit in, yet still having your own identity.
 - Being in a position of influence (of “soft” power) in a situation of intrigue, conspiracy, and working – perhaps in business - for people who are not all saints
 - Being a member of a migrant minority community which has had to work hard to survive, but others envy your “success” and you fear you may lose what you have gained
 - Awareness of persecution of Jews in WWII and before and since, and noting that God cares about the survival of peoples and their ways of life.
 - Wondering why God has placed us here at this time
 - We may have a curiosity about the workings of rulers, and the system wives and concubines, eunuchs and harems. Some men may even experience a certain amount of despot envy.
- There are parallels
 - Women of faith and influence in the story of New Zealand.
 - Christians in the judiciary, politics, education and business in New Zealand and the difference they have made
- We might note
 - Understanding issues of the canon (what books were selected to go in the Bible and how and when did that happen in history) and text (how the different copies of those books got transmitted and the issues in sorting out differences between different copies).
 - What is in our Bible is the answer of communities of faith to the question “What writings do we recognising as bearing God's word to us in an authoritative way?”
 - God does speak through stories of those who have sought to do the right thing in complicated circumstances. We recognize that they have temptations too – those persecuted can become persecutors. We easily hear and believe what we want to hear and believe. We are special in the sight of God, and it is a wonderful gift to know that is true; but there are other people and peoples who are special in the sight of God as well.
 - That it is OK to be concerned for the protection of people and cultures. Our ways of life matters to God. All our cultures have to be brought under the judgement and salvation of God.

- While a sense of destiny is important, it is also dangerous. That danger means we should be alert to temptations to power, but it does not mean that we should not seek to fulfill the purpose, opportunity and responsibilities that God has given us.
- Esther models an ideal of worldly wisdom without spiritual corruption
- Rescuing the memory of our people and remembering rightly – not a bad festival for New Year and Christmas

Another retelling : the secret life of the Rev Ian Ryburn (1916-2002)

Ian Ryburn was a member of a fairly famous Presbyterian family. His parents were missionaries and he was born in India. He was related to a Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. Another was Master of Knox College, commemorated still in the the Ryburn Wing where the offices of the School of Ministry have been located.

It is not an easy heritage. In the 1930s Ian studied for his BA and in 1939 began training for the Presbyterian ministry. Many saw war in Europe coming. Many were pacifists – the European tribal warfare of the First World War was about national pride not necessity, it seemed the sort of war that it would be possible to stop by the simple mechanism of refusing to cooperate, though Pacifism during an actual war carried a high price.

Ian thought for himself, and was not convinced that there could not be such a thing as a just war where war with all its horrors might not be the lesser of evils. He almost secretly enlisted as an ambulance officer, becoming in 1940 part of the 6th Field Ambulance of the NZ Expeditionary Force.

He found the Army difficult, more so when after service in Greece he was in Crete where he volunteered to stay behind with the wounded and where he became a prisoner of war.

He also found his calling difficult. He did not identify readily with other Christians; he had questions, and he was diffident about expressing his faith. Yet he also felt the hand of God, the Hound of Heaven, on his life as a POW when he was asked to share in taking services. A turning point was when as a medical orderly it was asked what would they do if they were asked to treat an enemy soldier, and someone replied that he would “shoot the bastard”. Ian Ryburn had lost friends in battle, but this for him was not a Christian answer, and it was also his call to accept the invitation to leadership and the question “What would Jesus do?”

In the camps Ian came across a British officer that others treated with deep suspicion. John Brown was regarded as a traitor by prisoners, yet Brown told Ryburn that he was a committed Anglican. Perhaps there was more to Brown than met the eye? Brown confided that he was a member of MI6, the section of the British Secret Service charged with working with prisoners of war. Brown was a double agent, and Ryburn became his recruit. Ryburn too was treated with suspicion, though the odd one wondered if something more might be going on.

During the war the German High Command had been successful in recruiting soldiers from parts of Europe they had conquered and convincing them that they should fight against the Russians. The intention was that Brown, with Ryburn’s assistance and that of a few others, not all of whom were in the know, would as far as the Germans were concerned, help recruit a British Free Corp, and as far as MI6 was concerned do everything possible to make sure that it did not happen.

A special holiday camp, Genshagen, was built in Berlin, where potential recruits were sent for a special programme organised by Brown and Ryburn. They had better food, trips out of prison around the sights of Berlin, "civilian" clothers and programmes of games entertainment and recreation.

One difficulty was Ryburn's status. He was not a minister, though he had one year of training. It would be better from the point of view of his official role as chaplain if he could be ordained.

One of the astonishing stories of the War is that this was arranged during 1944 with the General Assembly in New Zealand. The German High Command wrote to the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand through the YMCA in Geneva, seeking permission to have Ryburn ordained so that he could be a proper chaplain and celebrate the sacraments. It was Brown's intention, obviously not conveyed to the Presbyterian Church, that it would also help Ryburn in his role as a British agent.

The request for permission to ordain was duly discussed by the Presbyteries of Dunedin and of Taranaki where Ryburn had been before going to Dunedin. Being Presbyterian they had to reassure themselves that he would not escape doing the full course for ordination and therefore he had to agree to complete his studies at Knox when he returned after the War!

As a result permission was granted by the General Assembly and conveyed back to Germany. Ryburn was duly ordained at the Genshagen Holiday Camp on 2 October 1944. The presiding minister was another kiwi POW, Rev Bob Griffiths, released from camp for the purpose. The chalice for his first communion was loaned by a local Catholic priest. The substantial congregation was made up of British aliens living in Berlin.

Ryburn's real task remained difficult. His approach was always to respond in religious terms. When a man asked what should he do, should he join the British "Free" Corp, Ryburn's response was to affirm God's love for them and ask what they thought Jesus would have them do. Brown and Ryburn were completely successful in the failure to recruit British soldiers. The scheme was abandoned, and their last months in Germany dangerous and difficult, but Ryburn got back to England after the war and to New Zealand.

The experience took its toll and had its cost. He could not settle back at the Theological Hall and the church did not push it. In successive parishes Ryburn met ex POWs who saw him still as a traitor, but he could not explain to them, that actually he had been working for MI6. He did not even tell the whole story to his wife. He received no recognition from the church or the Army for what he had done. In 1971 he retired early from parish ministry.

For Ian Ryburn there were many Esther moments, requiring guidance, needing courage he did not always feel, and needing discretion because he could not explain to others what was going on.

His story has been researched by Frank Glen, and no doubt will be published. Frank is very interested in Ian's spiritual quest not just his military adventures. There are many sides to what this is about.

Does Ian Ryburn's story tell us something about "Esther moments", when we have to do things that are right we cannot talk about? That there are places for the Christian of moral ambiguity, not just moral certainty? And God is with us in those places too.

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