

Text: Esther 1-2

Theme: Series-When God appears Silent: Introduction to Esther

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Holy Communion Service on 10/07/2016 at 10.30am

The story of Esther is set in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. Verse 1 tells us that the Persian Empire extended from India to Gush (Ethiopia), over 127 provinces. That made it the largest and most powerful empire in the world and King Xerxes, who ruled over the empire, the most powerful man in the world at that time.

Many years before Esther's story begins, the Jews experienced civil war and the Jewish nation was divided into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah didn't walk with God consistently, so God judged them because of their unfaithfulness. First, Israel was attacked by Assyria and captured. Then, over 100 years later, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, deported the King to Babylon and removed the temple treasures - we read about this in 2 Kings 24. Eleven years later Nebuchadnezzar returned, destroying Jerusalem and taking most of the Jews into captivity.

It could have seemed to the Jews, and to the surrounding nations, that God had finally deserted them. But although invisible He was active, ordering the events of history in such a way as to preserve His people and keep them from being completely destroyed by the Babylonians.

In 539 BC Babylon fell into the hands of the Medo-Persians and around 486 BC - 100 years after the fall of Jerusalem - Xerxes became king of the vast Persian Empire.

The book of Esther records a small piece of history, spanning ten years, of the life of the Jews living in exile in Persia. It may have seemed to the exiled Jews that God had completely turned His back on them and was no longer working to deliver and save them from their enemies. But as the story of Esther unfolds, we will see that God is always working for His people's good; He is never inactive.

Maybe you have experienced devastating blows in the past that you've not yet recovered from. Maybe fears about the future overwhelm you. Perhaps you are currently experiencing trials that threaten to pull you under a rising tide of despair and doubt. In the midst of such desperation, God is there. The book of Esther shows us that He doesn't stand by passively, watching His people suffer, but He is actively working to bring about their deliverance.

Xerxes was in the third year of his reign, having defeated Egypt at war, when he gave a great banquet. Verse 4 tells us that the banquet lasted 180 days and was an extravagant exhibition of King Xerxes' greatness and wealth. This banquet was probably given as a reward to military officers and noblemen from all over the kingdom and was possibly also an opportunity to plan for the upcoming invasion of Greece.

At the end of the six-month-long banquet, King Xerxes gave another banquet that lasted seven days. This banquet was for everyone who lived in the citadel of Susa. No-one was excluded, from the greatest to the least. Again, it was a lavish banquet. Verse 7 records that: 'Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.' The guests could drink a little or a lot, or not at all if they chose. Everyone was free to do as they wished.

Verse 6 describes the garden of the king's palace in Susa and shows that life in the Persian Court during King Xerxes' reign was luxurious. They feasted on fine foods and drank from gold cups. The Persian court was dripping with wealth and extravagance.

King Xerxes was an incredibly powerful and proud king. At the beginning of his reign he was the most powerful man on earth. Archaeologists excavating at Susa have found inscriptions from that time in which King Xerxes refers to himself as 'The great King, The King of Kings; The King of the lands occupied by many races; The King of this great earth.' He obviously thought a lot of himself and very little about the God of Israel.

In contrast, read Philippians 2:5-11. Compare Xerxes' pride with the humility of Jesus, the true 'King of kings'. In his pride, Xerxes believed that he was greater than God Himself. How do you view yourself? Does your attitude reflect the humility of Jesus or are you tempted to believe that you are more important than God and others?

True greatness is demonstrated in humble self-sacrifice. Jesus said.

How do we respond when we're asked or pressured to behave in a way that opposes God's design for us?

Unsurprisingly, the seven-day garden party led to excess and inappropriate behaviour on the part of King Xerxes. He wanted to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, for all his drunken guests to enjoy (verses 10-11). It is unclear whether the king was ordering Vashti to appear in just her royal crown and no other clothing or whether he wanted her to appear unveiled before his male guests to show off her beautiful face. To appear in court without her veil would have been scandalous in those times and Vashti would have suffered a loss of dignity and respect from the palace staff and royal officials who were all present. Either way it was a demeaning request for Xerxes to make of his wife, and Vashti courageously refused (v. 12).

Was Vashti right to disobey Xerxes? More importantly for us, in light of the New Testament commands for wives to be submissive to their husbands, are there circumstances in which it would be right for a Christian wife to disobey? The apostle Paul is clear in his letters that God's design for marriage is that husbands should love their wives 'as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' and that a wife is to submit to husband 'as ... to the Lord' (Eph. 5:22-25). But God's command for a wife to submit to her husband is not without limits; she submits to him 'as ... to the Lord'. He hasn't given a husband the right to fulfil any sinful or self-serving desire he might have through the unthinking obedience of his wife. He doesn't require a woman to lose the dignity she has as a human being made in the image of God by allowing her godly principles to be trampled underfoot by an ungodly husband. The authority that a man has is given to him by God. So, when he disobeys or dishonours the Lord with that authority, there is a higher authority to which a woman must submit. She must obey and honour Jesus.

We cannot assume that Queen Vashti was a godly woman; it's unlikely that she had a relationship with God. If she practised any sort of religion, it's likely that she was Zoroastrian. But despite not belonging to the people of God, Vashti's refusal to obey her husband's order was a dignified response to an undignified request. It demonstrated great bravery for her to oppose the powerful king in this way and verse 12 tells us that 'the king became furious and burned with anger'.

Xerxes wanted to flaunt his queen's beauty in the same way he flaunted his wealth and power. She was a trophy; an object to add value to his status. Modern attitudes towards women are often just as degrading and devaluing. But God's design for manhood and

womanhood is both good and loving. He gives dignity to men and women and in Jesus both find equal worth and significance [Gal. 3:28).

Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king's order angered Xerxes and triggered a vengeful response. He sought counsel from his closest advisors, who are listed by name (v.14) to distinguish them from the eunuchs who had been sent to bring Vashti before him earlier (v. 10).

These advisors are described in verse 13 as 'wise men who understood the times', but their advice on this occasion sprang from fear that they, along with all other men in the kingdom, were about to lose control of their wives and suffer disrespect and discord once news of Vashti's 'conduct' was made public.

The proposed solution was twofold: first, to demean Queen Vashti by banishing her from the king's presence and giving her position to someone 'better' (v. 19); second, to continue the domination of women throughout the empire by issuing a decree that would further diminish their role in society (v. 20).

Today this reads as a gross overreaction fuelled by pride and paranoia. The wealthiest, most powerful man on the earth, in a drunken moment, followed foolish advice and made a rash decision resulting in the dethronement and banishment of his beautiful queen. The decree that Vashti could never again enter the king's presence was made public throughout each province of the kingdom and irreversible by the law of the Medes and Persians.

But in the midst of all that was happening in the palace, God was working on behalf of His people. He was committed to His promise to preserve them and keep them from being wiped out. He had already prepared someone to fill the space made in the king's household by the banishment of Vashti. King Xerxes had displayed his splendour, majesty and wealth for six months, but the Lord was the true ruler in Susa; silent but sovereign, He was working for His people's deliverance and salvation.

In 2008 tragedy struck the family of Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman and his wife, Mary Beth, when one of their daughters was hit and killed by her older brother as she ran in front of the car he was driving. As she buried her five-year-old daughter, Mary Beth cried, 'God, where were you? Where are you?' A year later she wrote these words on her blog:

*It might on certain days be buried deep down in my heart... but here is what I know and what I choose to believe, over and over again. I know God loves me and my family. I know God is sovereign and He knows what is best for us. I know He has our days numbered and makes **no** mistakes. I know that He will bring beauty from ashes... that is what I cling to in order to make it through another twenty-four hours ... I have to **choose** to believe this right now.*

It is often the case that we have to *choose* to see God in the midst of trials and difficulties. It is a choice to believe that He is sovereign. It is a choice to trust Him, even when we can't see what He is doing.

Esther 2:1-4

There are at least three years between the end of Esther chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2. Xerxes gave his banquet in the third year of his reign. We read in verse 16 that Esther was taken to him in the seventh year of his reign, having first completed twelve months of beauty treatments in accordance with the king's order (v. 12). In between this time, history records a disastrous attempt by King Xerxes to conquer Greece.

During this attack on Greece, Xerxes' mind may have been too focused on the battle to consider the consequences of Vashti's banishment. But as he returned to Susa,

defeated and humiliated, perhaps he regretted his decision to banish Vashti and wished for the support and comfort of a wife. His attendants must have sensed King Xerxes' need for companionship, because they suggested a plan to find a replacement queen.

Like other monarchs of the time, King Xerxes would have had a harem full of women, and he certainly had the power to command any woman in the kingdom to appear before him whenever he wanted. So, it seems that, in following the advice of his attendants, what he was looking for was not just a one-night stand or a casual relationship, but a replacement queen - a wife who would offer him intimacy and stability. Perhaps he also felt that a beautiful queen would improve his image following his defeat in battle.

As is the case in our culture, the Persians were obsessed with physical beauty, so the attendants' plan for a national beauty contest would ensure that the king's next wife would be the most beautiful woman in Persia. We are told later in verse 12 that this woman's beauty was enhanced with preparations and make-up for a whole year to make her presentable before the king. One commentator says that these words in verse 12 mean 'to rub, to polish, to purify and adorn with all kinds of precious ointments'.

Most of us don't have the means or opportunity to pamper and enhance our appearance for twelve months, but we can often be influenced by our society's obsession with physical and temporary beauty more than by God's desire for us to cultivate beautiful hearts that reflect the character of Jesus. Perhaps at times we wish we were more beautiful, but Esther's exceptional beauty was given to her by God, not for her glory but to fulfil His purposes for His people.

Verses 5-7 transfer our attention from the palace to the home of a man named Mordecai. We're told that Mordecai was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and that he was living in Susa. It seems that Mordecai's great-grandfather was one of the Jews who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Although some of the Jews had since returned to Jerusalem, Mordecai was still living in Persia, in the citadel of Susa, close to the king's palace.

Mordecai was raising his orphaned cousin, Hadassah, also known by her Persian name, Esther. Verse 7 tells us that Mordecai had taken Esther 'as his own daughter when her father and mother died'. This suggests that he was a man of integrity and compassion. Even after Esther entered Xerxes' palace, we're given the lovely picture of a concerned and protective guardian, as we read that every day Mordecai 'walked to and fro near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her' (v. 11). He was not a man who had adopted his younger cousin out of a begrudging sense of duty, eager to be shot of his responsibility as soon as possible. Mordecai showed a continuing commitment to Esther and a deep concern for her well-being, even after she left his home for the palace. Mordecai's love towards Esther contrasts starkly with Xerxes' self-love.

We're also introduced in verses 5-7 to Esther, the orphan being raised by her older cousin, Mordecai. However loved and cared for she was by Mordecai and however much she loved him, Esther knew the devastation and crushing pain of losing not just one but both of her parents at a young age. She had experienced tragedy, but God was working so that years later Esther would be instrumental in saving the Jews.

The only other detail we read about Esther at this point is that she was very beautiful; verse 7 says she 'had a lovely figure and was beautiful'. She was an insignificant Jew and had no connection with powerful King Xerxes. But God, in His sovereignty, was weaving their lives together to accomplish His purposes for His people.

There are many examples in the Bible of people whose circumstances were sometimes tragic from a human perspective, but in God's sovereignty led to triumph. Consider Job,

Joseph, Ruth, Daniel and Paul. The greatest example by far though is that of Jesus, whose rejection and suffering on the cross won forgiveness of sins and peace with God for all who trust in Him.

It is thought that there could have been as many as 400 women involved in King Xerxes' quest to find the next queen. But Esther was the one who caught the attention of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the women in the palace harem. Verse 9 tells us that Esther 'pleased him and won his favour'. Because of this he gave her preferential treatment, providing her with beauty treatments, special food and maids selected from the king's palace. Although we know that Esther was very beautiful, it's unlikely that it was just her external beauty that made her stand out among the most beautiful women in the kingdom. It's likely that her character and behaviour also attracted Hegai's attention.

But more significantly, God had chosen Esther to be Xerxes' next queen and every detail of her journey from obscurity to royalty was ordained by Him. He caused Hegai to favour Esther and treat her with extra care. He would later move Xerxes' heart to choose her as his queen. God's sovereignty, faithfulness and power are seen in the events that led to Esther's coronation. His mercy, compassion and love are seen in the details of Esther's experience in the harem.

We are told in **verse 8** that Esther was brought to the king's palace. We don't know whether this was by force, but we can assume some reluctance on her part, knowing that regardless of whether she was chosen to be queen, there was little chance of her returning home once she'd become part of the harem.

Esther was a young Jewess. She was protected and cared for by a guardian she loved and respected: Mordecai. It's unlikely that she would want to leave her loving home and the prospect of a Jewish marriage for life in a harem, no doubt filled with rivalry and jealousy and where she would be used for loveless sex for as long as she was considered to be beautiful. The fact that Mordecai told Esther to keep her nationality a secret (v. 10) suggests there was potential danger for her as a Jew in the palace environment. So, it is likely that she would have been frightened as she was taken to the harem. But God protected Esther and provided for her. He gave her grace and humility to endure her circumstances. He sustained her so that He could fulfil His purposes for His people. We often face situations in life that we wouldn't choose. Perhaps even now you're struggling with ill health or financial ruin; fighting with family members or friends; feeling rejected by a spouse, child or parents; or working in an ungodly environment. Do you struggle to see God's purposes in your situation?

Jesus understands how we feel in these times. Like Esther, He had to leave His home and experience loneliness and separation in order to fulfil God's purposes to save His people. Like Esther, He was surrounded by sinful behaviour and faced the temptation to compromise. But He submitted to His Father's will and even on the cross. His love, grace and forgiveness were evident (Luke 23:34).

Esther was given special treatment by Hegai when she entered the king's harem. She was given her own maids, the best living quarters and special food. Her beauty treatments were started immediately (**v. 9**), so she would have been one of the first women to be ready to meet the king. At least a year later, when each woman was ready to be presented to the king, verse 13 tells us that 'anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace'. But Esther showed restraint and self-control, asking 'for nothing other than what Hegai... suggested' (**v. 15**). The point of the contest was to please the king and gain his favour, in order to be named the next queen. Most women would have taken advantage of every possible extravagance offered them so that they could make themselves as appealing as possible to win the king's favour. **Esther displayed a modest restraint that**

reflected her trust in God for her future. She had no particular ambition to be crowned a queen.

Isaiah 30:15 says, 'in quietness and trust is your strength'. Israel didn't live out this promise and consequently ended up in captivity, but it seems that in the intimidating and godless palace of proud King Xerxes, Esther displayed a quiet trust in God and this was her strength. The replacement queen was not judged by King Xerxes on her looks alone. We're told that when a young woman was summoned, she spent the night with the king (v. 14). As well as pleasing him with her beauty, she also had to satisfy him sexually. Part of Esther's preparation would have been to teach her how to successfully seduce King Xerxes, but the respect he shows Esther in the chapters that follow suggests Esther retained her dignity despite this. It is possible for godly people to maintain their dignity even in the most undignified of situations. It is possible to lift up grace even in the most humiliating and degrading of circumstances.

Helen Roseveare worked as a missionary doctor in the Congo during the 1960s. She was held as a prisoner for five months and raped by rebel soldiers during the country's civil war. She writes in *Give Me This Mountain*; "They were brutal and drunken. They cursed and swore, they struck and kicked, they used the butt-end of rifles and rubber truncheons. We were roughly taken, thrown in prisons, humiliated, threatened." Helen was later able to thank God for trusting her with this suffering and to consider it a privilege to suffer for Jesus. Despite being treated in an undignified and humiliating way, she was able to maintain her dignity and honour Christ with her submissive response to that trial.

Once in the harem, it would have been easy for Esther to have been swept along with the frenzied competition to become queen. She could have become so busy rushing from one pampering session to the next that her ties with Mordecai could easily have become severed. It is a mark of her humility, respect and teachable spirit that Esther continued to follow Mordecai's advice even after leaving his home.

Esther had not told anyone her nationality because Mordecai had warned her not to (**v.10**). Having gained Hegai's favour, Esther could have become complacent about following this advice. She could easily have thought that her position in the harem was secure because of her beauty and winsomeness, but she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions and did so even after she had been made queen (v. 20).

Verses 9, 15 and 17 tell us that Esther pleased and won the favour of Hegai, King Xerxes and everyone who saw her. Esther's external beauty would have been enhanced by the twelve months of beauty treatments, but all of the women would have benefited from these treatments and all would therefore have appeared more beautiful than when they were first taken to the harem. Why did Esther especially stand out?

Despite her difficult circumstances, God worked in Esther's life to develop the characteristics of grace and humility that won the favour of everyone who saw her. 'Everyone' implies even the women in the harem who were competing against her for the king's attention. Ultimately, God made Esther so attractive to Xerxes that 'he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen' (v. 17). He demonstrated his delight in Esther by throwing a banquet in her honour, proclaiming a national holiday and distributing extravagant gifts (**v. 18**).

Esther is a beautiful example of grace, but she is not the most beautiful example of grace in the Bible. She points to Jesus, who embodied grace in all its beauty. John 1:14 says that Jesus came from the Father 'full of grace and truth'. Like Esther, Jesus experienced loneliness, broken-heartedness, humiliation and separation from His Father. But He was consistently characterised by grace, even towards his enemies. He was submissive to the will of His Father. He was humble and patient. He was compassionate and forgiving.

God has placed us in our individual circumstances, with our own set of challenges and pressures, but He has also given us His Spirit so we can reflect His grace in them. How can we develop the qualities of grace that will be evident to everyone who sees us, even our enemies? We need to trust God to control the circumstances around us and seek to develop the beauty and dignity that will draw attention to Him.

Are you waiting until your circumstances change before you allow God to shine His grace through you? Pray that God would transform you in your circumstances, however humiliating or frightening they may be, so that His grace and power are seen you.

The second gathering of the virgins (v. 19) suggests that the king's officials continued to gather beautiful girls for the harem. This is unsurprising. It's unlikely that King Xerxes would have embraced a restrained life of monogamy, releasing hundreds of beautiful women from his court, just because he had found his next queen in Esther. He quickly dismissed his previous queen, Vashti, because of her failure to comply with his irrational wishes, and he was predisposed towards hedonistic living. Why would that stop now, just because he had found his next queen? He was in party mode again, banqueting and holidaying with extravagance.

After Esther's coronation, Mordecai secured a job as a palace official at the king's gate (v. 19). In the ancient Middle East, the king's gate was the equivalent of our law courts, a place where important business was carried out. Perhaps Esther had used her influence as the new queen to secure that position for her cousin. Mordecai was now in the perfect place to uncover an assassination plot against Xerxes and report it to Esther so that she could warn the king (verses 21-22). Here we see God's hand at work in ensuring that Mordecai would be in just the right place, at just the right time, ready to uncover the conspiracy against the king. Years later this event would be significant in the saving of God's people, the Jews.

We're not told why Bigthana and Teresh became angry with Xerxes. Perhaps they liked Queen Vashti and didn't want to see her replaced. Perhaps it was because he chose to marry Esther, an outsider of the court, rather than a daughter of one of the seven noble families of the kingdom, as was customary. Perhaps they resented having being made eunuchs when everyone else was partying. It could have been over something very minor but we're not told why.

Mordecai could have chosen to ignore the conspiracy to assassinate the king. Xerxes was self-serving and unpredictable. Esther was living in the palace as his queen, still hiding her nationality. Mordecai could have wondered if he and Esther would be safer with King Xerxes out of the way. But he made the decision to warn Xerxes, showing grace when he had the opportunity.

Esther's grace and humility were also evident in the way she gave credit for uncovering the plot to Mordecai. She could have taken credit herself, further securing her favour with the king, but she credited Mordecai and his name was recorded in the official historical chronicles as the one who saved the king's life (v. 23). This was to be significant in the days to come. Mordecai received no immediate reward or recognition for saving the king, but God was invisibly working to accomplish His purposes.