

Text: Esther 2

Theme: Series-When God appears silent: Strength and Dignity on Parade

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 24/07/2016 at 10.30am

The book of Esther was written during a time when the Israelite people were asking the question, "Where is God?" It may have seemed to some of them, like it may seem to some of us at times, that God had forgotten them or that he didn't care about them anymore. They read the stories of Moses crossing the Red Sea and of Joshua praying for the sun to stand still, and of Elijah and Elisha raising the dead. And they looked at their own times, and saw none of these miraculous events, and they wondered, "Is God still at work? Has he forsaken or forgotten them?"

Esther 1 revealed a proud and powerful Persian king acting in very foolish ways. He threw a huge party, 180 days long, in which he was trying to gain support for a war against the Greeks. During the last few days of the party, Queen Vashti's drunken husband, Xerxes, summoned her to dazzle his dinner party guests with her beauty. However, when the order arrived she stood her ground and refused to oblige. So, what did the king do? He called on his so called wisest men of the country to discuss what they should do about Vashti's conduct. They advised him to sack his wife and that was what he did eventually.

But who would replace Queen Vashti? That's the big question we are supposed to be asking as we continue into chapter 2.

Verses 1-4

As time passed, (about 4 years if you read verse 3 side by side verses 16 and 17) Xerxes realised the consequences of his actions and missed his queen. Seeing that their ruler regretted the action that they suggested, the ministers proposed that he found a new queen via an elaborate x-rated beauty contest of all the kingdom's beautiful maidens, where the king is the judge and the only person in the audience, with the "in-bed with the king" as the highlight of the pageant. From all over the 127 provinces, beautiful women are brought to the palace for the king to select his new queen.

The girls would undergo an elaborate beauty treatment and then, when a girl's turn came, she would go before the king and spend the night with him. Then, after the night was over, she would return to a different part of the harem where she became a concubine. And because the king has slept with her, she has to remain in the harem. I will not elaborate on the customs of the Persians as told by Josephus and other historians, lest we are side-tracked in our story.

Verses 5-7, "Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died."

Here we come to a genealogical list. Take note that no genealogical record in Scripture is without some sort of important insight into the story. Any Israelite would pick up on it, but we do not, mostly because we are illiterate when it comes to the Old Testament. In this verse, the key insight we are supposed to notice is that Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin. Why is this important? King Saul, the first King of Israel was of the tribe of Benjamin? And by the way, Saul's father's name was Kish, and as we see in this genealogical record, so was Mordecai's

great grandfather. They are two different men, but with the same name, which together with the fact that Mordecai is of the tribe of Benjamin points to the fact that Mordecai is a descendant of King Saul. This little detail is very important for the rest of the story.

Over in 2 Samuel 16:5-13, we learn another interesting fact about Mordecai's lineage. Remember that Mordecai's grandfather was a man named Shimei, who was most likely named after this Shimei. Why is this important? Because if David had listened to his advisors and put Shimei to death, most likely there would be no Mordecai and no Esther in the citadel of Susa when they were needed. God is accomplishing His plan perfectly. So, we have Mordecai, a Benjaminite, a descendant of Shimei, a descendant of King Saul. All of this becomes very significant later.

Verse 6 gives us a little bit more information about Mordecai. Esther 2:6. Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. The NKJV clears things up by adding the word Kish. If it was Mordecai who was deported, this would make Mordecai about 115 years old and Esther about 80 years old. We know most likely that Xerxes would not pick a woman who was 80 years old to be his Queen, so it was probably Kish, Mordecai's great grandfather who was deported with Jehoiachin.

In Esther 2:7 we meet Esther.

And Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Verse 8-10

When they come to take her to the palace, Mordecai, insightfully instructs her not to reveal that she is a Jewess or who her family is. Esther and Mordecai apparently had chosen to adopt the dress, customs, and practices of their Gentile neighbours, at least to the extent that they could successfully conceal their identity as Jews. At what point does the assimilation of culture compromise our Christian faith and witness? Many Christians today are indistinguishable from their unbelieving neighbours in dress, entertainment choices, parenting styles and so forth. Was it really such a big deal for Esther to hide her Jewishness? Is it really such a big deal if no one outside this church building even knows we come here regularly and indeed profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it a big deal if we conceal our faith to get ahead at university or in the business world or to earn a friendship or be accepted by a peer group? Yes, it is. Jesus says, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my word in this sinful and adulterous generation then I will be ashamed of him when I come in my Father's glory with the holy angels." Let's see the danger inherent in compromise and let's hear the challenge not to assimilate to the world around us and live like everyone else.

Was Esther a saint of some sort? I don't think so. In fact, things are not looking good for her. We have already discovered in Esther 1 that it is possible to refuse the unjust demands of an empire if you are prepared to suffer the consequences. Remember Queen Vashti! She defied the wishes of the king because 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 (Esther 1:12).

From Esther's roots, she had more reason as a Jewess to defy the king. She was one of God's people, though a Jew in a foreign land. But instead of standing out from the crowd she was rather keen to get into bed with the king on the advice of her uncle. Look at verse 10. "Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so." So yes, every day he walked to and fro near the courtyard of the harem to find out what was happening to his cousin but never did he encourage her to remain loyal to her roots.

She was told repeatedly to keep her religious identity below the radar of Persian detection. At this stage, we see that Mordecai too was morally flawed and complicit in the disobedience of Esther to God's laid down statutes.

"By Law, Esther was not to marry a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4), or have sexual relations with a man who was not her husband.

We don't know what would have happened if she had spoken up and said she was a Jew. Perhaps she would have been disqualified from the contest, perhaps everything would have continued as normal. But that's not the point. We are not supposed to make decisions based on a future we cannot predict and cannot control. We are supposed to trust God for the outcome and make the right choices in the present.

We can contrast Esther with Daniel who refused to eat the things from the Kings table (Dan 1:5) because the food would include items considered unclean by the Jewish Law." In fact, Esther probably ate them partly because Mordecai told her to not let anyone know she was Jewish, so he is partly to blame.

At this point in Esther and Mordecai's history, they were spiritual rebels and misfits. Needless to say, after a 12-month process, Esther is deemed the fairest of them all. "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she carried charm and favour before him more than all the other virgins, so he placed the royal crown on her head, and made her queen in place of Vashti" (Esther 2:17).

But here is the good news for us today. Although God did not rescue Esther from this situation, her past failures did not exclude her from God's future plans. Here you see the Grace of God in Christ Jesus being displayed. Instead of God's judgement on Esther and her scheming uncle, God spread his cover over them and showed them His favour and love by his intervention. (See Gen 20:1-7) This is salvation to the undeserved.

No doubt we can all look back to past mistakes in our Christian lives that we cannot undo. We can remember situations caused when we have actively suppressed our faith and lived like the world around us. We may be asking, where does that leave us today? The good news of Jesus is that he offers us a fresh start and through His sacrifice on the cross, he is not ashamed to identify with those who would put their faith in Him.

The story that we have read in Esther this morning confirms God's graciousness in his averment that in Christ, our sins are removed from us and that God does not remember them anymore.

At this point in the story of Esther, God is still the real thing as He will always be. Esther is no saviour nor a heroine. Mordecai does not fare any better. She is both in the world and of the world, fully compliant with the empire's outrageous demands to have a one night stand with King Xerxes. However, we cannot read this one chapter and forget the bigger story of this exciting adventure. We must not forget that her history of compromise and sin will not disqualify her for later obedience, an obedience that will bring a blessing to her people.

So, in conclusion, Esther is much like our lives today, God may not be in the spotlight at the centre stage, but he is behind the curtain queuing the lights and prompting the lines. The book of Esther teaches us that if you have to ask where God is, you have already missed Him.