

Esther 1 - A godless world

Tim Anderson 11/7/21

So we begin our new sermon series on the book of Esther today.

I'm excited.

Lots of people around the church
are reading Peter Adam's excellent book on Esther.

That's got to be good.

Home groups are looking at Esther.

That is great.

It builds extra momentum when we do things together.

And it's a great story.

I'm an Australian.

I love stories where the underdogs come out on top.

And the triumph of Esther and Mordecai over the evil Haman
definitely has an underdog comes us trumps vibe.

It's also a great girl power story.

Lots of women reading the Bible
are hankering for some strong female characters:

Esther is your girl.

You go girl.

Indeed I've met women
who feel somewhat cheated after reading Esther.

How come no one ever told me this was here before?

I've been hanging around the church for years,
and Esther has never come up.

But here's the Bible character that I've been looking for!

Well there's lots to be excited about.

There are also some difficulties to face.

Lots of the Bible is story.

It tells stories of what happened in history.

That makes it easy to read.

Stories are a bit more gripping than lists of laws or that kind of thing.

But stories come with a bit of a catch.

They tell you what happened.
But that doesn't mean that it ought to have happened.
Just because Abraham had sex with his wife's maid
doesn't mean that God thought it was a good idea.
Just because Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness
doesn't mean that you should too.
So how do we read stories as instruction from God?
Well we measure what we read in the stories
by the instruction in other parts of Scripture.
And we look for the voice of God in the stories.
Often God is there in the story telling you what he thinks of events.
It's easy if you are reading a story in the gospels.
If Jesus says something,
that is the voice of God.
Or if you are reading Exodus:
If God speaks from a burning bush,
or if he addresses Moses directly,
it's easy to know what to believe.
Believe God!
It's not so easy in Esther.
We don't have reflection on the book of Esther
in other parts of Scripture.
The New Testament doesn't quote Esther.
Esther is one of the last books in the Old Testament to be written.
So there wasn't much opportunity
for other Old Testament books to reflect on the story.
And we don't have the voice of God in Esther.
Esther is the only book of the Bible where God is not mentioned.
Not once.
But don't despair.
I'm not telling you that Esther shouldn't be in the Bible.
It's here for a reason.
And God isn't mentioned for a reason.
It's part of the narrative art of the author
that God isn't mentioned.

Because Esther and Mordecai lived in a world
where God seemed absent.

So part of the way the author helps us to imagine ourselves in that world
is to make God hidden for us

in the same way that God was hidden for the Jews in the story.

And then our job as readers is to find God when he seems hidden.

OK so to summarise,

Esther is a ripping yarn.

But it's a bit hard to read from a Christian vantage point.

But also important to read from a Christian vantage point.

Because our vantage point is quite similar to Esther and Mordecai.

God seems a bit hidden in our world.

Many of our rulers don't acknowledge him,

Just like Xerxes doesn't acknowledge him.

It's sometimes hard to know what his purposes are
in allowing some things to happen.

But some of the tools we will use to read Esther
can also be used to read the world around us.

So it will be good practice for us.

So we turn to Esther chapter 1.

And the first question we must ask

as with every chapter of Esther,

is where is God in this story?

If you can't find God in the story,

then it's hard to understand what God is tell us through it.

So where is God in Esther chapter 1?

I can see Xerxes, I can see Vashti.

But far from seeing God,

there is no one in this chapter who even believes in God.

So where is God?

The answer is that God is setting things up
to put his woman in a position of influence.

If the events of chapter 1 had not happened,

the Esther could not have become queen.
And God had an important purpose in making Esther queen.
She became queen to save God's people.
And up until the events of chapter one,
she was not in the running to become queen.
She wasn't born into a noble family.
And the king already had a wife.
But this is God's pattern throughout history.
When he has someone do a significant work in his kingdom,
he usually brings them from way out of left field.
David wasn't even brought in from the fields
when the prophet Samuel was looking for someone to anoint as King.
His father Jesse
thought that all his older brothers were more likely candidates.
But God makes things happen out of left field.
While the events of chapter 1 were taking place,
Esther would not have in her wildest dreams
thought that God was preparing the way for her to be queen.
But he was.
How do we respond to this truth as Christians?
I think it helps us not to worry.
Jesus told us not to worry.
Mt 6:25 "Therefore, I tell you,
do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink,
or about your body, what you will wear."
But lots of us find Jesus' teaching hard to put into practice.
We find ourselves worrying quite a lot.
Well Esther 1 helps us not to worry.
God is at work sorting out the solution to the problems of the world.
He's doing it behind the scenes.
He's doing it in ways that no one would dream of.
He's got it sorted.
So we don't need to worry.

OK now we've found God in the story,

is there anything we find out about life?
Well as you read the goings on in Xerxes court,
you can't help but be struck by conspicuous consumption.
It's easy when you read about kings in the Bible
to think that they are all pretty much the same.
There are the Kings Sihon and Og that Moses defeated.
The Kings of the Philistines that David defeated.
The Kings of Israel that ruled in Samaria,
and the Kings of Judah that ruled in Jerusalem.
There is Pharaoh King of Egypt.
And there is Xerxes king of Persia.
You could think they were all pretty much of a muchness.
It's actually not true.
Sihon and Og were pretty much warlords over a tribe.
If they weren't mentioned in the Bible,
no one would have known about them.
The Kings of the Philistines were basically rulers over small cities.
Let's say Lord Mayor of Bendigo, types.
Impressive if you've never been out of Bendigo.
But on the world stage, not so much.
The Kings of Israel are a little more impressive,
particularly David and Solomon
who ruled over a united Israel.
They were rulers of a middle power nation.
Think Scomo.
But Xerxes of Persia was the ruler
of one of the greatest Empires in human history.
He's up there with the Roman Emperors.
And when he has a party,
he really has a party.
A six month showing off of his wealth and splendour.
A party that lasted for seven days.
Representatives from all 127 provinces of his Empire were at the party.
There was an unlimited drinks tab
and everyone drank out of cups made of gold.

The decorations were of unparalleled extravagance
in the colours of his empire.

And as you can imagine with a weeklong party with unlimited drink,
the king and most of his guests would have been pretty drunk.

How do you react to such conspicuous consumption?

Do you wish that you could have been invited to the party?

Do you feel indignation for the poor who went hungry,
while the wealthy and powerful feasted?

Esther 1 just describes the party.

It doesn't give us any real clues about what God thinks of such excess.

But Prov 15:16 tells us this,

"Better a little with fear of the Lord
than great wealth with turmoil."

Well there is conspicuous excess in our world too.

No doubt you can read about it

in the gossipy news about the rich and famous.

How much did Kim Kardashian's 40th birthday cost again?

But I hope when you read that stuff,
you know why you are reading it.

There's only one reason it gets reported on,
people want to stir you up to be jealous.

They want you to feel like you will be happier
if only you do your own little bit of conspicuous consumption.

OK not quite so extravagant as Kim Kardashian.

But extravagant for you.

Give yourself a special treat and you'll be happy.

Well King Xerxes gave himself a special treat.

It was the mother of all parties.

But was he happier at the end of it?

Was his wife Vashti happier at the end of it?

Did they have a better marriage at the end of it?

No, No, and definitely No.

That's conspicuous consumption for you.

It won't make you happy.

The next thing about life we find in the story is the relationship between Xerxes and Vashti. Lots of people get married. And there are always questions about how husbands and wives should relate to each other. And we're interested in the answers to these questions. Well Xerxes thinks it's OK to parade his beautiful wife in front of his drunk party guests. Vashti thinks it's OK to tell him to get lost. And Xerxes thinks it's OK to banish her for the slight. Now there's not enough detail in the story to really understand what went on. For example, we don't really know when Vashti was instructed to appear wearing her royal crown, whether that was all she was to be wearing. If so, you can totally understand why she would refuse to put in appearance. But even if not, it seems to our understanding of marriage to be flat out disrespectful for a husband to think it's OK to parade his wife in front of his drunk guest for them to leer at. But of course, being married to the King of a great Empire is not the same as marriage as we might think of it. Xerxes had a harem full of concubines. He could acquire and dispose of wives as he saw fit. Vashti was probably lucky that she was only banished. Her head might have lost contact with her neck.

What does the Bible have to say about this situation?
Col 3:18-19 "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.
Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them."
Is it loving to command your wife
to parade in front of your drunk guests?

No.

I mean not even Donald Trump would ask Melania to do that.

It's about puffing yourself up.

It's about saying, "Look what an important man I am,

I have in my possession one of the most beautiful women in the world, and she does whatever I tell her."

That's not loving, that's purely and simply a display of ego.

Did Vashti fail to submit herself to her husband as is fitting in the Lord?

Well she didn't know the Lord Jesus because he hadn't been born yet.

She didn't know the one true God because she lived in a pagan nation.

She couldn't know what was fitting for one of God's holy people.

But you'd have to say she didn't submit herself.

Whether she should have or not, you can make your own mind up.

I really don't think we're given enough details

to know how unreasonable the command was,

and whether it was worth risking her life to disobey it.

But notice the quote from Colossians says,

"Submit yourselves".

The word yourselves is really important.

It's not about husbands forcing their wives to submit.

It's about a choice freely made by the wife.

And really that critiques the whole structure of royal marriages.

In Xerxes harem wives didn't get to make free choices.

They couldn't submit themselves

because they either obeyed or got banished.

There was no free choice for them.

The Bible is really telling us

that the ways of powerful men are not God's ways.

Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Was Xerxes harsh?

Undoubtedly.

He banished his wife from his presence for a slight at a party.

That's ridiculously harsh.

OK the last thing to notice about life.

I think this is the most important thing.

What you overreact about will reveal your idols.

Vashti wouldn't come and be ogled at.

Xerxes had a choice at this point.

He could have said,

"OK I'll get a couple of my concubines from the harem to entertain the dinner guests.

Vashti can give me a private beauty pageant when the guests have gone home."

But he didn't.

1:12 "Then the king became furious and burned with anger."

Was he overreacting?

Yes he was.

This was not something to get furious and burn with anger about.

Then he summoned his cabinet for a council of war.

Was it the Egyptians invading from the West?

No.

Was it the Chinese invading from the East?

No.

It was Vashti telling the king

she didn't want to be ogled at by his drunk subjects.

Was it an overreaction

to summon the cabinet to deal with this calamitous situation?

Yes it was.

It was an overreaction to the point of comedy.

Except it was real.

Was it an overreaction to send a decree to every one of his 127 provinces, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household

as a response to the Vashti slight?

Just a tincy wincy little bit.

Did it make Xerxes, the most powerful person in the world, look faintly ridiculous?

Here I am governing 127 provinces,

all the way from India to Egypt.

And I can't get my wife to do what I ask her to.

Please take note everyone!
 Yes he looked ridiculous.
 His tiny insecure self couldn't cope with not getting his own way.
 So he huffed and puffed about it.
 And succeeded in achieving the whole world knowing
 that his tiny insecure self couldn't cope when he didn't get his own way.
 It was the mother of all overreactions.
 And so it revealed his idol.
 What was Xerxes' idol?
 His idol was being respected by other people.
 Being seen as a big man.
 That's why he threw the world's biggest party.
 That's why he couldn't cope when Vashti defied him.

Well the great thing about that for us
 is that it helps us identify our idols.
 Often it's hard to know what your idols are.
 Unless you happen to be worshipping a statue of Buddha or something.
 Or unless your excesses are of Kim Kardashian proportions,
 so your idols are obvious for all the world to see.
 But for most every day people,
 it can be quite hard to identify their idols.
 What are the things that I am prone to trust in
 instead of trusting in God?
 It could be the respect of other people like Xerxes.
 But it could be leisure, or money, or sex, or fine food and wine,
 or peace and quiet, or power over others, having a fine mind,
 knowing every piece of gossip in Hastings, spoiling your grandchildren.
 So many possibilities.
 And we can't destroy the idols of our hearts
 unless we can first detect what they are.
 So what are your idols?
 Well king Xerxes helpfully provides you with a diagnostic tool.
 What is it that causes you to overreact?
 As I've been reading through Esther

and thinking about it,
I've been caused to examine what things I over react to.
It's been helpful for finding my idols.
My biggest thing is looking like an idiot.
If someone makes me look like an idiot,
then I tend to overreact.
That means that looking clever is an idol for me.
So I need to pray that God would take away
the unhelpful attachment to looking clever that lurks in my heart.
And I need to be awake to signs that I'm over reacting.
When you react to something,
it's not enough
to discover if there was a genuine offence that you are reacting to.
You also need to think long and hard
about whether your response is proportionate.
If you detect a disproportionate response,
then that's a sign for you.
It's telling you,
hold on a minute.
There's an idol lurking in the background there.

OK that's Esther chapter 1.
God preparing the way for his queen to get on the throne
and his people to be saved.
And some life lessons for us.
Excessive consumption won't make you happy.
God's wisdom for marriage will help your marriage.
Don't follow the marriage path of Xerxes and Vashti.
And overreaction is a key to discovering your idols.
Keep your eyes open for signs that you are overreacting.
That will help you put your idols to death
and worship God with an undivided heart.

