

Esther 2 - Meet Mordecai and Esther  
Tim Anderson 18/7/21

Not sure if you've noticed it,  
but over the last generation  
our world has become more obsessed with the body beautiful.  
There's a whole culture of working out down the gym  
that just didn't exist a generation ago.  
Cherida and I have even got into it,  
though using the cheapskate's method of using workouts on YouTube.  
I don't harbour any illusions of beauty mind you.  
But it is rather nice when you get a conversation like this.  
Alvoli: "Those are nice pants Dad. Are they new?"  
Tim: "Not new, Alv.  
I just haven't been able to fit into them for 10 years."  
People are decorating their bodies with tattoos.  
They are paying for surgery to make their breasts bigger or smaller,  
their tummies flatter,  
and well I don't want to list all the cosmetic surgeries.  
And if they can't make it in real life,  
then at least they can fake it on instagram.  
Got some imperfections?  
Photoshop can fix all that for you.

The pointy end of the body obsession is the beauty pageant.  
Miss World or whatever it is.  
That's where young women can compete for the honour  
of being labelled fleetingly as the most beautiful.

Well the beauty pageant is not new.  
In our reading today,  
Esther is enrolled in the Miss Persian Empire beauty pageant.  
The prize for the winner -  
the royal crown of Queen of the Persian Empire  
and the hand of King Xerxes in marriage.

It sounds kind of exciting.  
Until you scratch beneath the surface.

But let's begin with most important question.  
What is God doing in Esther 2?  
Two things stand out for me.

Firstly, he's putting his woman on the throne.  
God's plan to save his chosen people  
requires his servant to be in a position of influence in the land.  
And here we have Esther being plucked from obscurity,  
and rising to be queen of the Persian Empire.  
Can God work through Xerxes carnal desires,  
Mordecai's discretion,  
and Esther's beauty and wisdom,  
to achieve his purposes?

Yes he can.

And he did.

Secondly, God is preparing the downfall of the enemy of his people.  
It's easy to get swept up in the beauty pageant.

But there's a second story here.

Mordecai uncovers a plot on Xerxes life.

And the plot is reported to King Xerxes.

Is it a big deal for the kingdom of God if Xerxes gets murdered?

No. not really.

He's just the king of a pagan empire.

It was brutal world back then.

Very few kings died of old age.

Somebody bumped them off in their insatiable lust for power.

Kings come and go.

It doesn't really affect the important stuff,

like people worshiping and serving the one true God.

But in this case it is important.

Xerxes has just made God's woman his queen.

His life needs to be preserved so that Esther gets to save God's people.  
But more than that,  
later in the story, Haman needs to be taken down a peg or two.  
He opposed God by trying to wipe out God's people.  
So God shames Haman by Haman being forced to honour  
the representative of God's people, Mordecai.  
By saving Xerxes life,  
things are prepared so that Mordecai can be honoured later,  
when it is just the right time in God's plans.  
Xerxes forgets to reward Mordecai now,  
just so that in God's perfect timing,  
he can remember later on at just the right moment.

That's what God is doing.

Now let's reflect on the story from the perspective of life.

What lessons can we learn?

Lesson 1. Using other people is ugly,  
even if you dress it up as a beauty pageant.

At the rough end of town  
you exploit people by putting a gun to their head  
and forcing them to do what you want.

Could be a real gun.

It could be a metaphorical gun.

Pimps exploit prostitutes by controlling their access to drugs.

But the wealthy and powerful manage to exploit people  
by creating the situation  
where those people will want to do their wishes.

It's a more clean and hygienic way to exploit people.

They don't hate you for it,  
at least initially.

It's far easier to kid yourself and others  
that you are actually doing them a favour.

So you can maintain a reputation in the community  
for being a respectable person.

And you can exploit more people at one time.

If you exploit people with a gun to their head,  
you have to constantly protect yourself.

It limits how many people you can control.

But if they come under your control willingly,  
then you can exploit more at a time,  
and it makes you more powerful.

The classic way the rich and powerful exploit people in our community  
is through pokie machines.

Poor people are queuing up to give their money to rich people.

They do it willingly.

Pokie machines might be the classic.

But beauty pageants serve the same purpose.

They are marketed as the way

for some lucky young girls

to make it in the fashion and beauty industry.

"You've got to get a foot in the door.

Here's how you get noticed.

This will get you a start."

But what they never tell the young girls up front

is that there is an expectation

that you will sleep with the middle aged men who organise the pageant.

Because you need to do something else

to distinguish yourself from all of the other girls, right?

They are all beautiful.

How are you going to be the one who gets chosen by the magazine?

Beauty pageants are just a way of wealthy men

exploiting young women for their own purposes.

And it's upmarket exploitation

because your victims sign up willingly.

What does the Bible have to say about exploitation?

Deut 10:18 says, "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow,  
and loves the foreigner residing among you,  
giving them food and clothing."

So in our reading, we have Esther.

Now Esther is an orphan,  
her mum and dad have died.  
She's also a foreigner living in the Persian Empire  
with all the disadvantage that foreigners customarily experience.  
In other words, she's ripe for exploitation.  
Who does God defend in Deuteronomy?  
The orphan, the widow and the foreigner.  
That is the people who are easiest to exploit.  
The people who are weak and can be taken advantage of.  
And Esther sits squarely in two out of three categories of disadvantage.  
And there are two men who interact with Esther in our story.  
They are Mordecai and Xerxes.  
What does Mordecai do?  
He takes a powerless young woman,  
and he gives her a home.  
There's nothing like having a roof over your head  
to give you some safety and dignity in the world.  
And Mordecai feeds Esther.  
She certainly wouldn't have been earning any money.  
When you take an orphan into your home,  
you need to provide for their needs.  
2:7 "Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter  
when her father and mother died."  
Who knows whether Mordecai had other children?  
The book doesn't tell us.  
If he did, then Esther ranked equally with them.  
He treated her as his own child.  
He cared for her.  
He didn't exploit her.

Now how about Xerxes?  
What was his record on caring for the powerless?  
Well he decided he needed a new queen  
because he banished the last one  
because she wouldn't bow to his drunken request

to show off her beauty.  
So how does he go about finding a new queen?  
Well he has his officials scour the whole empire  
for beautiful young virgins.  
He's not content with one wife.  
He needs to choose from a good range  
at the beautiful virgin supermarket.  
So he rips dozens, maybe hundreds of young girls out of their homes  
and puts them in his harem.  
Remember he had 127 provinces  
and he appointed commissioners in each province  
to provide girls for his harem.  
You'd be a brave commissioner  
who couldn't come up with at least one girl for the king.  
So let's say he had at least 127 girls taken into his harem.  
In those days in that culture,  
most of these girls would have been already pledged in marriage  
in a union organised by their parents and the parents of a young man.  
They would have been looking forward to having a family of their own.  
Hoping for a husband who would provide well for their family.  
And Xerxes tears them away from all that,  
and puts them in his harem.  
Away from their parents who they love.  
Away from their friends.  
And for most of them shattering their dreams of marriage and family.  
Did the girls volunteer to go to the kings harem?  
The book of Esther doesn't tell us.  
The girls in beauty pageants volunteer today,  
but I suspect in the Persian Empire that Xerxes' power was so great,  
that his commissioners didn't need to call for volunteers.  
He probably just took what he wanted when he wanted it.  
So I think it would be fair to say,  
that Xerxes is doing pretty much the opposite  
of what Deuteronomy says we should do in caring for the powerless.  
Instead of defending their cause and caring for them,

Xerxes exploits them for his own sexual gratification.

But it doesn't stop there.

Someone has to look after all these beautiful young virgins when they get taken into the king's harem.

Is the king going to be able to trust his officials in a harem full of beautiful young virgins?

Of course not.

We know that even on pain of death, the temptation would be too great.

So what does he do?

He puts eunuchs in charge.

Now eunuch is a word you might be familiar with.

It means a man who has had his testicles cut off.

Cut their testicles off,

and they don't have any testosterone being pumped into their body.

And then they will have no sex drive.

And you can trust them to behave.

Just like geldings on a race track.

Again it's exploitation, pure and simple.

These men are denied families of their own.

Forced to endure a painful operation without anaesthetic.

Because anaesthetics didn't exist in those days.

All to make sure that Xerxes 127 virgins were only molested by him.

This isn't caring for people,

it's exploiting them.

It's violent exploitation.

Now of course as most clever, powerful people do,

Xerxes does his exploitation with some inducements.

No doubt the virgins in the harem

didn't mind 12 months of beauty treatments,

six months with oil of myrrh

and six months with perfumes and cosmetics.

Most young girls wouldn't mind being made as beautiful as possible.

And possibly they even looked forward to their night with king.

Maybe they would be the lucky one chosen and become queen.  
 No doubt the eunuchs were comparatively well paid,  
 and their job wasn't as arduous as digging ditches.  
 They might have appreciated the responsibility and the job security.  
 But just because there are inducements  
 doesn't stop it being exploitation.  
 It just means that it's exploitation organised by someone crafty  
 rather than some brute.

There no question that God would have us be like Mordecai not Xerxes.  
 It's not OK to take whatever you can get from people.  
 It's not OK to use them and discard them.  
 The Bible teaches us that everyone is made in the image of God.  
 People made in the image of God should be treated with respect,  
 even if they are powerless.  
 So what does this mean in our culture?

Well it means that we should recognise exploitation,  
 even when it's the type of exploitation  
 that people willingly participate in.  
 "The Bachelor" - it's exploitation.  
 People willingly participate, yes.  
 But it's actually about clever TV execs making a lot of money,  
 dangling the carrot of some sexual fun and some financial inducements,  
 five minutes of fame.  
 But it tears at the participants' faithfulness in relationship.  
 That's going to impoverish their future relationships.  
 It will make it more likely their children will live in broken homes.  
 It will have a corrosive effect  
 on the valuing of faithfulness in the community.  
 It's exploitation to make someone a lot of money.

I already mentioned pokie machines earlier.  
 And you can lump tattslotto,  
 sports betting, casinos and all the rest in with that.



People participate willingly.

But mostly it's about the poor giving their money to the rich.  
It's exploitation.

What about bringing people to Australia from overseas  
to work in conditions that Australians by and large won't put up with?  
Well it's trickier.

These people sometimes do so willingly,  
and the Pacific Islanders come back year after year.

That shows that they agree to it  
even after they know what's it's really like.

And the work they do doesn't have a corrosive effect on them  
like playing the pokies destroys your life if you get addicted.

But in other ways we do exploit them.

They pay Australian taxes while they are here.

But they don't get access to Medicare if they get sick.

The Uber drivers do the job willingly.

But the clever exploiters who set the system up  
are not only inducing the migrants who work for them

to sell their labour very cheaply,

but they have also destroyed the livelihoods of the taxi drivers.

What do we learn from this passage,

that we wouldn't know

if we only had the verse from Deuteronomy

about God defending the cause of the powerless?

I think we are confronted with the truth

that not all exploitation

looks like Pharaoh of Egypt making the Israelites slaves.

Some forms of exploitation are more subtle.

They trick the exploited into being part of their scheme.

But in the end, the kings sexual desires are determined to matter more  
than the dismembering of hundreds of families.

It's still exploitation.

It's not loving your neighbour.

Well we have a little bit of time left,  
so let's tackle another life lesson from the passage.  
When you look at things from Esther's perspective,  
the chances are she didn't have the luxury of deciding  
that the King's harem was exploitation  
and she didn't want to be part of it.  
Chances are someone spied her beauty  
and from that point on she just had to do as she was told.  
You can be very sure  
that Mordecai wouldn't have advised her  
to be part of the King's Harem if he could help it.  
He was obviously worried about her.  
That's why he walked back and forth every day  
near the courtyard of the harem,  
trying to pick up a bit of news about Esther and how she was going.  
Mordecai was an adoptive father  
with the loving concern of a true father.  
So Esther is just put in a certain situation  
and she just has to make the best of it.  
Does she object to being given to a pagan king  
to be sexually used and potentially discarded?  
If she was a God fearing young woman, she would have.  
The Jews were instructed not to marry pagans.  
Otherwise the children would not grow up  
worshipping the one true God.  
You can bet that if Esther had a child to Xerxes,  
that child would have been brought up  
to worship Ahura Mazda the chief Persian god  
not Yahweh the true God.  
But whatever Esther's thoughts about her situation,  
her only option was to make the best of it.  
So how did she go about making the best of her situation?  
She won the favour of the people in charge of her,  
and she listened to their advice.  
Three times in the passage

we are told about Esther winning people's favour.  
As soon as she is placed in the Harem,  
she wins Hegai's favour.  
It's like Joseph when he's working for Potiphar or in jail.  
It's like Daniel with the Babyonlian kings.  
2:15 We are told that Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her.  
Maybe it's easier to get people onside if you are stunningly beautiful.  
Well yes it is, no maybe about it.  
But Esther did this more successfully  
than all the other stunningly beautiful girls in the harem.  
Then finally we are told that Esther won Xerxes' favour.  
Xerxes was 39 years old at this point.  
Esther would have been 15 or 16.  
Let's not pretend this was anything like a marriage of equals.  
But even though powerless, Esther won people's favour.

Now you could just say this was God at work behind the scenes,  
putting his chosen queen on the throne to save his people.  
God inclined their hearts favourably to Esther.  
But in the Bible, God works with the human characters.  
He doesn't use magic, he uses their humanness.  
Why were people favourably disposed to Esther?  
God inclined their hearts that way. Yes.  
Esther was a winsome person. Yes also.  
It's both and, not either or.  
What is winsome about Esther?  
She listened to the advice  
of the people under whose care she was placed.  
Mordecai advised her not to reveal her ethnicity.  
He obviously had a sense  
that there was a stigma attached to being one of God's people.  
He's going to be proved very right in later chapters.  
And Esther listened to him.  
Hegai had seen lots of virgins go in for their night with the king.  
He knew what to take with you to win the king's favour.

What was it?

We're not told.

It wasn't Lindt chocolate because chocolate wasn't invented yet.

But the important thing is not what Esther took with her.

It's that she followed good counsel.

And that served her well.

Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of fools seems right to them.

but the wise listen to advice."

What do we see in this passage.

God working behind the scenes to save his people  
and honour his servants.

We also see how the powerful exploit the powerless.

And we are encouraged to care for the powerless like Mordecai,  
not exploit them like Xerxes.

We are also see how listening to wise counsel  
enables Esther to win the favour of those around her.

And we are encouraged to be wise.