

Esther 3 - An enemy of God's people  
Tim Anderson 25/7/21

The Nazis tried to wipe the Jews out of Europe.  
6 million Jews were killed by the Nazis in 1930s and 40s.  
That's more than the population of Melbourne.  
I've stood in holocaust museum in Jerusalem.  
It's built like a gas chamber.  
So as you enter the museum,  
you have the physical sensation of going down into a gas chamber.  
The stories are chilling.  
And they are true.  
The holocaust is the standout ethnic cleansing etched in our minds.  
But it's far from the only one.  
During the first World War,  
the Turkish government  
decided to get rid of ethnic Armenians from amongst them.  
The Armenians were Christians, the Turks were Muslims.  
And so about 1 million Armenians were killed.  
The Armenians have never had a homeland since  
and those who survived are scattered throughout the world.  
In the mid 1990s, the largely Christian Serbians  
massacred around 8000 defenceless Muslims at Srebrenica in Bosnia.  
At around the same time,  
Hutus killed nearly a million Tutsis in Rwanda.  
Even in Australia, we have witnessed genocide.  
Indigenous Australians were wiped out of Tasmania,  
and massacred in many places on the mainland.

We read about the plans Haman cooked up  
And they are nothing short of diabolical.  
But sadly they are not confined to the ancient world.  
This kind of thing happens among people today as well.  
As much as it might be distasteful,  
we must reckon with the reality of the human heart.

So let's dive into the text.

3:1 "After these events,  
King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite,  
elevating him and giving him the seat of honour  
higher than all the other nobles."

After these events.

After what events?

After Mordecai discovered a plot on Xerxes life,  
had the king warned about it and saved his life.

It's ironic, isn't it?

Seems like Mordecai's good work has been ignored.

But this was merely one event of probably dozens  
that happened on that day in the life of the ruler of the Persian Empire.

And while it had significance  
on the development of the rest of this story,  
it was probably a sideline  
to machinations of the running of a great empire.

And chapter 3 is now 5 years later.

Lots of water has passed under the bridge  
that is not relevant to our story.

But somehow in the political cut and thrust,  
Haman managed to get himself promoted.

Was he an outstandingly brilliant official?

Who knows?

But what we do know from our own experience is  
that it's not always the people who do the best work who get promoted,  
it's the people who manage to get in favour with the boss.

And often it's the people  
who don't mind being a bit ruthless in cutting down the competition.  
And both of these traits are in evidence here in the chapter.

Haman shows his ruthless streak when he is slighted by Mordecai.

How does he respond?

I'm not just going to punish Mordecai,  
I will wipe out his entire people group.

That's ruthless!

My response to being snubbed - genocide.

You can imagine there might have been a few dead bodies by the side of the road that led to Haman's path to the top.

So he's ruthless.

But how does he go at greasing up to the boss?

Well what's his first action

after signing the decree that will have the Jews exterminated?

3:15 "The King and Haman sat down to drink".

Haman was the king's drinking buddy.

It's no fun getting drunk by yourself.

But in the company of friends?

Why you can have competitions

as to who can do and say the most ridiculous things.

And while you are drunk it will all seem absolutely hilarious.

To any sober person watching you just look like idiots.

But when has a drunk person

worried what sober people are thinking of them?

And we already know what King Xerxes thought about a drunken party.

Back in chapter 1,

he hosted a week long party with unlimited booze for all of the guests.

No question, Haman was ingratiating himself with the King using the king's second favourite hobby.

And the picture we get of King Xerxes

was that so long as he had a good time with his drinking buddy,

he was pretty happy to let Haman

do most of the administrative work in running the empire.

And if that meant a bit of genocide,

well he wasn't awfully fussed about that.

Why was it that Haman reacted so viciously to Mordecai's refusal to bow to him?

Yes Haman was an ambitious ruthless man,

but that doesn't fully explain his desire to start a genocide.

Most power hungry nasty vindictive types

would have had Mordecai impaled on a pole or something and left it at that.

Why does Haman want to wipe out the whole Jewish people?

Well if you are anything like me,

you will have completely missed the clue in the text.

3:1 "After these events,

King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him the seat of honour higher than all the other nobles."

Haman was not a Persian.

Haman was an Agagite.

The Agagites were descendents of King Agag.

King Agag was an Amalekite.

And the Amalekites had had a history with the Jews for centuries.

In fact it's a bit more personal than that.

It's not just that the Amalekites had a history with the Jews.

Mordecai is introduced in chapter 2 as a descendent of Kish.

Kish was King Saul's father.

Mordecai was descended from the very guy who captured Agag.

And Haman was descended from Agag.

It might have been 500 years earlier -

but why should that spoil a good vendetta?

As an Australian,

it's kind of foreign to me,

just how entrenched hatreds can become

across people groups for centuries.

I mentioned the massacre of the Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in the 1990s earlier in the sermon.

How did the Serbs justify such a wicked action in their own minds?

Well in their minds it was payback.

Payback for earlier massacres of Serbs by Bosnians.

When did those earlier massacres occur?

In the 1300s.

Yep that's right.

retaliation 600 years later.

Human beings have such a capacity to hold grudges.  
What had happened with the Agagites?  
Well the Amelekites had attacked Israel  
when she was fleeing from Egypt after being in slavery to Pharaoh.  
They had always opposed God's people.  
And in 1 Samuel 15 King Saul captured Agag the Amalekite,  
and the prophet Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord.  
I think you can be pretty sure that Haman knew that story.  
And he had been brought up to hate the Jews from his childhood.  
And now Mordecai had given him the perfect opportunity  
to even the score on behalf of his people.

Now it would be easy to see this  
as an episode in a centuries old conflict between two people groups.  
And it is.  
But that's not all it is.  
You see, one of the people groups is God's chosen people, the Jews.  
When Haman plots to exterminate the Jews,  
he doesn't just oppose the Jewish people,  
he opposes the promises of God.  
God said to Abraham, the Father of the Jews,  
"I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse."  
Haman is really taking God on here.  
Your God promises to curse those who curse you.  
I'm going to curse you,  
and let's see what Yahweh can do about it.  
God had promised to send a Messiah to be king over his people.  
A ruler from the line of King David.  
If Haman is successful,  
there won't be a line of King David.  
All the descendents of David will be massacred  
from one end of the Persian Empire to the other.  
That would have included all or nearly all the Jews.  
So if Haman wipes out the Jews,  
he's wiping out the future prospect of our messiah.

He's wiping out the hope of the world,  
the forgiveness of our sins,  
the gift of eternal life.

Haman is not just an evil man planning a genocide.

Haman is to use a NT word, an antichrist.

The apostle John warns his readers,

1 John 2:18 "Dear children,

this is the last hour;

and as you have heard the antichrist is coming,

even now many antichrists have come."

Antichrist means against Christ.

Haman is against Christ

because whether he knows it or not,

he's trying to stop Christ being born.

He's a spiritual forebear of King Herod

who killed the babies in Bethlehem trying to destroy the baby Jesus.

Let's spend some time thinking about what this story means for us.

You see Haman is not a one off.

John tells his flock,

"even now many antichrists have come".

They were around in Esther's time.

They were around in the apostle John's time.

And they are around today.

People who aren't afraid to shake their fist at God  
and try to oppose God's people.

We can expect to see antichrists today.

What triggers antichrists to oppose God's people?

There's a very telling verse in our reading.

Haman is offering the king

reasons why he should support the genocide of the Jews.

It's probably not his own reasons for hating the Jews,

as we've already said that had to do with a personal slight  
and the history of Agagite / Jewish conflict.

But neither of those would sell well as an excuse to the king.

So what reason does he give?

3:8 "There is a certain people dispersed among all the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws."

Well we can write off the not obeying the king's laws part.

That was just Haman extrapolating from the fact that Mordecai wouldn't bow down to him.

But keeping themselves separate?

Having different customs?

These were true.

There was nothing wrong with them.

And they are number one way to incite racial and religious hatred.

Why is it

that until very recently with Xi Jinping's anti Australia rhetoric, the Chinese found acceptance in Australian society so much easier than the Lebanese?

Even with Xi's carry on, the Chinese are probably still more accepted.

It's because they don't keep themselves separate.

They don't have noticeably different customs.

I'm not saying

that migrants should disperse themselves in the community and shed their cultural heritage.

Just that when they do, they have an easier time of it.

People are inherently suspicious and fearful of those who keep themselves separate.

Those who are different.

How does that affect Christianity?

Well we are commanded to keep ourselves separate.

Heb 12:14 says, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy;

without holiness no one will see the Lord."

What is holiness?

It is keeping separate.

The Jews in the Old Testament had food laws and a dress code to keep them separate.

They were commanded not to intermarry with the nation to keep them separate.

Holiness means keeping separate.

If King Xerxes throws a drunken party

and you choose not to get drunk,

then in your mind you are honouring God by not shedding self control and making yourself an easy victim to temptation.

But the other party goes just think you are someone who keeps themselves separate and they distrust you.

And the difficulty for Christians in Australia today is that the demand for us to keep separate from our society is going up at a rapid rate.

Only a couple of generations ago,

the social expectations of our community

were so shaped by Christianity,

that even if folks weren't Christians,

they would never object to you practicing your faith if you were.

But that's not how it is today.

In many areas of life,

our "customs are now different from those of all other people".

It was only a couple of months back

that we had a family from our church

made a snap decision to relocate to Mildura

because the customs and values being taught at the local High School were damaging to values of their family.

It's inconceivable that would have happened 30 years ago.

A kid might leave a school because they got in with the wrong crowd.

But no one would have left a school because their parents said,

"We can't cope with what this school is promoting amongst its pupils."

My own nephews had an instance

where their school was encouraging boys to come to school

in the girls school uniform and vice versa.



My sister didn't pull them out of the school,  
She decided they were well grounded in their faith  
and wouldn't be swayed.

They were in Y11 and 12 at that stage.

But if your kids were younger and more likely to be swayed,  
you may well decide to pull them out.

And the thing about that is,  
people watch what you are doing and they say,  
"These people keep themselves separate,  
their customs are different."

And anyone who's an antichrist like Haman  
can use that to whip up sentiment against the people of God.

What do we do about it?

Well we need to keep separate.

Our society is going in many ways that are anti God.

You can't just wink and play along.

And that means that young people who are Christians today  
are far more likely to face opposition for their faith  
than I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s.

We need to prepare young people for that.

Our young people today need to be taught how to cope  
when the world calls them bigoted and intolerant,  
just for faithfully following Jesus.

Because it's going to happen to them.

Haman's spiritual descendants will make sure of it.

What kind of things do we need to teach our young people?

We need to teach them not to give as good as they get.

If you are a sharp and feisty young person,

there is a great temptation to respond in the way you've been spoken to.

But Jesus calls Christians to turn the other cheek.

Turning the other cheek is going to be harder in the future  
than it was in the past,  
and it's never been easy.

We need to teach our young people that facing opposition is not a sign of God's disfavour. Jesus tells his disciples, Jn 15:18-19 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." Those would have been very appropriate words for the Jews who heard Haman's decree. They are very appropriate words today for those who have been chosen out of the world by the Lord Jesus.

Well there's lots to think about when it comes to responding to the spiritual descendents of Haman today. But there's one more question I want to ask of this passage. It's always an important question in Esther. Where is God in this passage? Because even in the darkest episodes in the story, God is still there. So what is God doing? The answer is that God is there in the rolling of the dice. That seems a bit of a strange thing to us. We use flipping a coin or rolling dice to leave things up to chance. But in the Bible, I think every single time people leave things up to chance, we see God intervening to send things in the direction of his purposes. The sailors cast lots to see who was causing the problem that was making their boat sink in the storm. And the lot fell on Jonah. You can't tell me that was a fluke. It was God. The apostles cast lots to see whether Matthias or Barsabbas

should be the apostle to replace Judas.  
They weren't leaving it to chance.  
They firmly believed that God would overrule in the 'chance' event.  
In this story, Haman, like most people in the Persian Empire,  
was a superstitious person  
who thought that there are good days and bad days,  
and you'd better let gods decide  
what day you choose for an important event,  
because that will determine whether you have bad luck or good luck.  
Well Haman's gods didn't decide what would come up on the dice,  
the real God did.  
And his choice was to put the date chosen for the genocide in Adar  
when the dice were rolled in Nisan.  
In our calendar, that's like putting it in December  
when the dice is rolled in January.  
And that was what gave Esther and Mordecai time  
to put a plan into action  
to save God's people from annihilation.  
Even in the darkest moments,  
God is there making sure his purposes prevail.  
You can't derail God's plans.

So let us thank God that he's always in control.  
And let us pray for ourselves  
as we come up against the spiritual descendents of Haman  
in our world today.