

Dorset South & West Circuit

Service for Sunday 29 September 2024 by Rev'd Peter Clark

Call to worship

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news! *Mark 1:15*

Hymn 1 – Singing the Faith 82 - O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder

1 O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

2 When through the woods and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze:

Then sings my soul ...

3 And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin:

Then sings my soul ...

4 When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home — what joy shall fill my heart;
then shall I bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim: my God, how great thou art:

Then sings my soul ...

*Stuart K. Hine (1899–1989) vv. 1, 2, 4 based on O store Gud 1885 by Carl Gustaf Boberg (1859–1940)
Words and Music: © 1953 The Stuart Hine Trust. All rights worldwide administered by Kingsway*

Prayer of Adoration /Approach

Loving God, in the company of all your people we come to you, and your presence is joy to us. We come here on this first day of the week to meet with you and with each other and to listen for your word for each one. We are ready to break bread and to drink wine, to remember again the stories of our faith, and to be changed by being here with you. As we worship in the company of angels, surrounded by the saints, and embraced by your love, let us give ourselves openly and freely, as you give yourself to us, in tenderness and love. Loving God, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, we worship you, the one holy and eternal God.

AMEN

Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon

God of justice and forgiveness, we confess that we live in a world in which some are hungry even for bread, many people are sad or hurt, and there is much that is unfair and unjust. We confess that in our own lives we do not always do what is right or turn away from what is wrong. We ask your forgiveness, we claim your love and mercy, and we ask for courage to make a new beginning. In the name of Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Jesus said, 'Your sins are forgiven'. *Mark 2:9*

He also said, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'. *Mark 3:35*

Theme Introduction

I look on the Bible as a collection of the experiences of the People of God - good, bad and imperfect as they are - and we seek as the continuing People of God to serve, learn and practice, guided often by those experiences.

As often as not (or problem more often than not!) we learn more from their mistakes and the lesson is to avoid doing likewise rather than finding ourselves looking at impossibly good people who we cannot hope to emulate.

In this service we will explore one such tale from the Hebrew Scriptures and hopefully gain some insight on how we and others might behave?

Hymn 2 – Singing the Faith 53 - How shall I sing that majesty

- 1 How shall I sing that majesty
which angels do admire?
Let dust in dust and silence lie;
sing, sing, ye heavenly choir.
Thousands of thousands stand around
thy throne, O God most high;
ten thousand times ten thousand sound
thy praise; but who am I?
- 2 Thy brightness unto them appears,
whilst I thy footsteps trace;
a sound of God comes to my ears,
but they behold thy face.
They sing because thou art their sun;
Lord, send a beam on me;
for where heaven is but once begun
there alleluias be.
- 3 How great a being, Lord, is thine, which doth all beings keep!
Thy knowledge is the only line
to sound so vast a deep.
Thou art a sea without a shore,
a sun without a sphere;
thy time is now and evermore,
thy place is everywhere.

John Mason (c. 1645–1694)

Scripture – Esther 7:1-6 9-10 & 9:20-22

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" 6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Reflection - Making better choices

Life is a story – I mean you couldn't make it up really could you? A story with rich characters and a dynamic script full of promise, excitement, challenges, suspense, threats, wonderful things that can happen, terrible things that might happen. Life is a story and we are the characters in it. Living it, breathing it, playing out the drama that is richer and more challenging than Eastenders or the Archers any day of the week – and it runs every hour of every day of every week!

And the Book of Esther is similarly a story – a story that many have dismissed as a mere fairy tale, some believing it to be a work of fiction, and often quoted as the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God. It's a story that prompts the question amongst many, not just the scholars, as to why it is in the Bible at all?

Its certainly a story that begs the question as to why I am focusing on it, when there's a wonderful Gospel story to focus on?" And it's a good question with no really good answer ... apart from the fact that Esther comes up on the Lectionary only rarely and I haven't explored it in a Sunday Service for nearly 20 years!

Then again, it is a **very interesting** story ... and it **is** in the Bible, for whatever reason and, as I said earlier, we can learn far more sometimes from Bible stories than from lists of 'do's and don'ts.' So let's see if we can learn something from this wonderful, exciting, suspenseful but also dreadful, dark and disturbing story from a difficult time in the history of Judaism, shall we?

Esther is 10 chapters long and set in the time of the period after the fall of Jerusalem and the forced exile to Babylon. The Babylonian Empire has in its turn fallen to the Persians and their King Cyrus has allowed the Hebrews to return to their lands. Many, though have taken the advice of Jeremiah and settled both there and throughout the lands – maintaining their Jewish identity as a separate body and yet contributing to the society.

They are a hard-working and resourceful people who are able to take up the opportunities offered in the service of the Empire – and as long as they can resist the temptations to assimilate and compromise their God, they are assured that they will prosper and be blessed.

But their separateness leads to suspicion and they are seen by some as a threat. There are no real grounds for these misgivings – in truth it is really an exhibition of racial prejudice - and this, probably the earliest recorded incident of anti-Semitism, lies at the core of our story.

One of our characters – Mordecai – a senior and wise member of the Jewish community – hears of a plot against the King and does his duty as a good citizen by informing on the plotters, who are duly punished. Mordecai, interestingly is not rewarded. Is this because of the prejudice against his people? Possibly.

Meanwhile his niece, Esther, does received a reward, not for her service, but for her grace and beauty. She, together with many other young virgins, has been taken to the King's harem and chosen from all of them to take the place of Queen Vashti, who has paid a price for wilfulness. It's an uncomfortable story for us in a more liberated and more equal era. But Esther is no dumb beauty – she is thoughtful, cunning and resourceful - and she will not hold her position with her looks beauty alone. Interestingly, though, she informs no-one of her

origins and relationship with the Jewish community – this time almost certainly because of the prejudice against her people.

So the beginning of the story sets up the tale with a nicely balanced air of uncertainty and suspense

And more than suspense, there is this poison of racism that eats away in the heart of the King's chief counsellor, Haman, snubbed by Mordecai, who refused to be subservient to him. Haman not only takes this personally, he decides to take revenge not only on Mordecai but on all Jews. He persuades the king to carry out ethnic cleansing against the Jews – a holocaust is planned and threatens the nation of Israel.

More personally it affects the unrewarded Mordecai and of course potentially his highly placed niece Esther. If she keeps her head down, of course she might not be noticed and might survive the pogrom – it is tempting no doubt to take this option. But Mordecai persuades her that fate – and by implication their God, Yahweh – has placed her in a unique position to be able to affect this threat and calls upon her sense of duty to her family and her people. He calls her to take a risk.

And she responds – and shows her mettle and character by insisting that she will do this – but she will do this **her** way. She invites the King and Haman to dinner where she wines and dines them, charms and impresses them. And when the King responds by offering to reward her, instead of accepting, she invites them to first come again the next night for dinner.

Picture the scene that night as significant events occur. First there is the King who has had a good night. He is dazzled by his new, delightful, beautiful and intelligent new wife. But he also finds he is troubled by something – for something about her has set his mind thinking and his memory is troubled.

Is it perhaps sparked by her looks that somehow hold a family resemblance to Mordecai – and indicate that if Esther had opted to keep her head down that ultimately she would have been uncovered? Whatever sparks it, the King eventually discovers that he never rewarded Mordecai for his part in saving his life and resolves to rectify this shortcoming in the morning. He drops to sleep.

Then there is Haman – thrilled at the invitation, at the dazzling company, at the honour. He feels he has arrived. He feels he is **it**. He feels positive and exhilarated and ... and still it is not enough because of the poison of his race hatred. Racism is like that and eats away inside people, digesting their humanity and compassion.

Haman resents Mordecai – hates him still seeing him as an equal and as he can't wait until the decree to take effect so is persuaded while on his egotistical high to order a high gallows to be built so he can dispose of the object of his hatred as soon as he has persuade the King to hang Mordecai. He feels he can persuade the King of anything now that he has arrived, now that he is **it!**

And in this state of exhilaration he arrives in response to a summons from the King.

"How should I reward one who has delivered great service?" Haman is asked.

"Who else is he talking about than me?" thinks Haman – and all his greatest desires trip gaily off his tongue – rich robes, a fine stallion, public acclamation. And he awaits the King's expected punch-line, "Then you, Haman, honoured servant, shall have all these things and more!"

But instead he hears a quite different pronouncement; "Excellent answer – give them to Mordecai for his service to me!" And Haman has the humiliation of seeing the object of his hatred given all the rewards that he himself has deeply desired. It is a caricature of irony and humiliation writ large! But there is worse to come.

That night, when Haman joins the King as they are both wined and dined, charmed and impressed once again, Queen Esther is ready to pounce. When asked impatiently by the King what it is that he can offer her to show his admiration, his love, his respect, she doesn't choose the shallow things that Haman desires. She chooses life – the life of her people. She sticks her neck upon the block by coming out as one of the Children of Israel and asks the King to change his mind about the upcoming holocaust. How often is intolerance undermined by meeting personally a member of exactly the body of people believed to be an inherent wrong?

My father's first proper job was as a lecturer at the fast-track Police College in Bramshill, Hampshire. He told a story of a racist policeman who basically boasted about his hatred of Jews. This hinged on an argument that you could tell they were shifty on the basis of their appearance, which he characterised as dark, threatening, slimy, devious and unattractive.

When told that my Dad's colleague, a blond, blue-eyed tutor, whom the Officer trusted and respected, was in fact a Jew, his whole bigoted house of cards collapsed around himself and caused him to think again!

Likewise, an ordinand at my college was similarly challenged when, previously assured in his theologically reasoned position of opposing homosexuals in Ministry, discovered that a Minister encountered during a placement in the USA with whom he worked and admired for his pastoral, preaching and other giftings, was himself a homosexual with a long-term partner.

In the same way, Esther revealed to the King that the woman he adored, loved, and was enchanted by, was a Jew. It put a lie to the tale that these people were a vile and ugly people who opposed the law and security of the Empire. Haman's bad day gets worse as he makes further errors and ends up summarily hoisted not only by his own petard – but hoisted up on his own gallows.

Mordecai is elevated to his replacement and if I am honest, I would prefer if the story ended there!

Sadly and horrifically, there follows a highly distasteful and triumphalist act of revenge on those who had oppressed the Jews. It is not pleasant and I can't simply dismiss it by saying that it sadly reflects the violent times of its authorship. Revenge and unjustified overreaction were desperately wrong things then and remain so today. I cannot, for example, help but say that, appalling and wicked as the October 7th atrocities by Hamas were, I also condemn the terrible acts being wreaked on the people of Gaza in response.

More than that, this story reflects an understanding that when we find ourselves in a position to do the a good thing that helps others, even when it puts us at personal peril, it is right to do it.

It gives a message about the wrongness of racial prejudice and intolerance. It gives us a message of perseverance in the face of overwhelming opposition. It also gives a message that those who are led by malevolence may appear to prosper but they will ultimately pay a price for their wrongheadedness.

But more than any of these messages, it does give an impression of God in control, guiding and prompting via a light hand on the tiller. A God who cares for justice and wants us to make the right decisions – and a God who is here as a part of the story – even when we don't seem to be aware of that presence. There are times when we don't have the benefit of knowing the script – and we may feel despair at those times, and not without reason.

But we should never completely despair because we are assured of the guiding love of the Father. Mordecai had cause to despair for himself and his people, but he continued to trust

and to act. Esther likewise might have lacked faith and failed to act, but she had the courage to risk all and to fulfil her calling.

We likewise should hold onto the faith that we have developed, in the assurance of the presence of God in our lives, listening out for the promptings of the Spirit and acting in accordance with our faith. AMEN

Hymn 3 - Songs of Fellowship 37 - Be bold, be strong

Be bold, be strong,
For the Lord your God is with you.
Be bold, be strong,
For the Lord your God is with you.

I am not afraid,
I am not dismayed,
Because I'm walking in faith and victory,
Come on and walk in faith and victory,
For the Lord your God is with you.

Morris Chapman. Copyright © 1983 Word Music/ Adm. Song Solutions CopyCare

Offertory Prayer

God, we thank You for Your love for us and for this world You made. Thank You for inviting us to be Your people sharing Your love. In response to Your love, we give in different ways – volunteering, donations to charities and to church, sharing our time and talents. We offer all of these offerings to You, to further Your Kin-dom community. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Prayers

O Most High, you give us bread when we are hungry,
you quench the thirst in our souls.
We pray today for all who are hungry and for all who thirst for you.
Bless those who feed the hungry in night shelter and foodbank,
and bring to judgement those who allow our people to hunger and thirst.
Bless those who help quench the thirst of those seeking you,
and bring to judgement all who stand in your way.

Risen Lord Jesus,
we pray for people who have evil choices forced upon them,
praying for support as they seek to deal with their dilemmas.
We pray for those who staff women's refuges,
making places of safety for the most vulnerable and abused.
We pray for people trafficked into the UK to be bought and sold,
whose bodies are valued more than their humanity.
We pray too for the men who control them,
that in the piercing light of your judgement,
they repent and face justice.

Most Holy Spirit,
the awesome fear of you is the beginning of wisdom.
Knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
Help us to be in awe of you, to cast aside familiar contempt,
and to learn again of your power and justice, that we may find life.
May your Spirit of Peace rest upon those who use violence, terror and war to cause chaos,
pain and horror, that they may change their ways and work instead for a just peace.

Eternal Trinity, bless those for whom we now add our own prayers for those we especially have concerns for ...

and bless us as we long for life, thirst for justice
and hunger for the world to come as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us ...

Our Father ...

Hymn 4 – Singing the Faith 545 – Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart

- 1 Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.
- 2 Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.
- 3 Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.
- 4 Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always; b
e thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.
- 5 High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish, 8th century translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880–1931) versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860–1935) (alt.)

Blessing

Jesus said, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you,
and what mercy he has shown you.' *Mark 5:19*

The blessing of God be upon you, the One who loves you, the Christ who calls you, the Spirit
who makes you holy, today and always. AMEN