

ESTHER
“GOD IN THE SHADOWS”

All-night parties with alcohol flowing as freely as you could ever want and the lads trying to have a good time; there’s a bit of the battle of the sexes and women rebelling against the drunken advances of the men; divorce; a royal wedding and all the trappings; make-over treatments with all the oils and lotions that you could imagine, spa therapy perhaps; a beauty queen contest to find new the queen; power politics and underhand political dealings, behind the scenes wrangling, all because someone wants to be the top dog; the threat of genocide and ethnic cleansing! Is all of that in Bible? But there is no mention of God! Has God disappeared? Is He not there at all? Does all of this take place behind His back? It all sounds so familiar; it could be the UK in 2011. All of these are part and parcel of life in our world; the same news stories appear on our screens every evening, and in the papers every morning; what’s changed? Some want to push God out altogether; for people of faith, at times it seems as if God is not working anymore, but has disappeared!

In fact, all of this is in just one Bible story, the story of Esther. It is not a story we tell very often; she’s not a person we know a lot about, but hers is a story of faith and courage in the most trying circumstances. Esther is a unique story in the bible because God is not mentioned at all, not even once. I wanted to call the sermon “God is hiding” or some such, then I read *The Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Bible* and Colin Sinclair’s description of “God in the Shadows!” is much better. We’ve been thinking about how to live out the Christian faith in a hard world; we’ve looked at various stories of people who have done just that – Noah, Joseph, Ruth, Gideon – people who were laughed at for the faith, who suffered, who were in despair, whose hopes and plans didn’t work out, who were poor, weak and afraid and yet people who lived out their faith even in the most trying times. For all of them, there were two overriding realities: God with them always and everywhere and God is King; for Esther, there is no mention of God. Does that mean that finally God has gone away? What happens then?

Esther’s story takes place in Susa in Persia; the Jews are in exile and this takes place in the days before Ezra began to lead them home. The Jews have a feast called Purim (which means ‘drawing lots’) and this is the story behind that festival. There are four main characters in the story; let me introduce them to you;

Xerxes – he is the Persian king between 486 – 465 BC; an all powerful man, with the power of life and death over his subjects, including his wives; but he has a good heart and knows good when he sees it, knows evil when he sees that too in the end! He runs the show and everything that happens in the story is down to him; or so it appears and so he thinks! His queen when she annoys him and she refuses to play his boys’ games, so he divorces her and looks to find a new queen by a royal beauty contest.

Esther – a beautiful woman who wins the Miss Persian New Royal Bride contest and becomes queen; though she keeps her Jewish-ness quiet at the start. Her faith and courage grow as the story goes on!

Haman – the baddie in the story. He is the King’s grand vizier and wants everyone to know just how powerful he is; a proud and arrogant man who thinks that he is the most powerful man and tries to bend the king to his will. He is intensely annoyed by Mordecai and plots not only to kill Mordecai, but Mordecai’s whole people just because Mordecai refuses to bow when Haman passes! He builds a huge gallows for Mordecai, but gets his come-uppance in the end when he is hanged by his own rope. He draws lots for the day when the Jews will be slaughtered, his ‘lucky day’, only for it to backfire in a big way!

Mordecai – Esther’s cousin; he brought her up when she was an orphan. He puts her name forward to the beauty contest; he guides and counsels Esther; he annoys Haman; he foils a plot to assassinate the king and the king rewards him for his loyalty much to the even greater annoyance of Haman.

The meat of the story is Haman’s plot. He is so annoyed by Mordecai that he plots to kill the Jews. He has persuaded the King that the Jews pose a threat to the kingdom and that he needs to get rid of all of them and that Haman is man to do it. The King agrees and Haman arranges the day by throwing lots. What’s to be done? Mordecai hears of the plot and appears at the palace gate in sackcloth and ashes; the Jews mourned their fate. Esther got to hear of it from her cousin: he urged her *“to go...”* (4:8) That’s not as easy as it sounds; the king had the power of life and death over his queen; if she goes unbidden to the king, she risks her life if this angers him. Mordecai persuades her that she won’t escape; the palace will be no safe haven. *“If you ...”* (4:14) *“Pray for me”* she says.

Dinner parties are wonderful things. Esther holds a dinner party to which she invites the King and Haman; how proud is Haman – he is the only guest at this royal dinner party. The first one leads to another dinner party and on the second occasion, Esther reveals Haman’s treachery. He tries to wheedle his way out of it, but the King has seen evil for what it is and Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The King can’t repeal his original decree, but he passes another decree giving the Jews the right and power to defend themselves against Haman’s attack. All that was planned against the people of God has been brought to nothing; Mordecai is honoured: he rises to a place second in rank to Xerxes himself in Persia.

God in the shadows – Esther is unique amongst bible books, because there is no mention of God; God’s name is nowhere to be seen in Esther. Does that mean God is not there? Actually no! The theme of book is that God is in charge of this whole situation; God is king of world events and looks after His people. The nearest we come to hearing that is: *“if you...”* (4:14) God will rescue His people; the most obvious rescue is by Esther’s influence in the palace and perhaps the pattern of events has put her there for this very reason; if that doesn’t work, then Mordecai knows that God will have a plan B! God’s people got themselves into this situation, as they got themselves into all kinds of other straits, pickles and muddles, but God still cares for them and is at work to preserve them and keep them safe. God may be in the shadows, but He is still the sovereign God of the universe, the One who has all things in His hands from beginning to end.

We live in interesting times as Christians. There are times when it seems as if God has gone away and we are left to battle the forces of secularism and atheism in our culture on our own. They have all the good press, the good headlines, the political support and all the headlines about the Church are troubled! Faith is not a popular thing amongst those who make the most noise. So we are marginalised, talked down as irrelevant, intolerant and useless. Why would God allow this to be said about the people He loves and cherishes? I don’t know that, but I do know that it is happening and we are challenged to live out Christian faith in that kind of world. There are other times, when it is clear to me that God is still at work in our world: all kinds of people are interested in Church and faith, who are asking questions about life and its meaning and purpose; last month there was a youth event in the city which left 150 young people on the street because the venue was too small for everyone who wanted to be there. God has not

gone away; there are times when it may seem as if He is in the shadows, but He is still here and He is still king of everything!

Courage to believe – “*who knows...*” (4:14-16) It is one thing for Mordecai to tell Esther of her great opportunity; it is quite another for Esther to put it into practice. But she did! She took her courage in both hands, put her life on line and went! She had the courage to reveal her Jewish-ness when it might have become the opportunity for Xerxes to throw her out! He might have taken Haman’s side in the argument and she had no way of knowing that beforehand. She rescued her people by her courage and her faith. She took all kinds of risks, but there was courage in her heart and her faith was rewarded.

It takes courage to be a Christian in today’s world. It takes courage for a teenage Christian to become part of an SU group and so openly identify themselves as Christian, at the risk of bullying and abuse and much more so today than in years past. It takes courage for the Christian in the work-place to stand up for Christian values when the business is being run corruptly or when others are taking shortcuts that mean the work is not done as well as it should be. It takes courage for people to begin to come to Church for the first time because of the reaction of their family and friends and what that decision might cost them. It takes courage in today’s moral debates to make a public stand for Christian standards and values and be subjected to abuse and vitriol of the most vile kind! For the Church not merely to survive, but to grow in the future, it is going to take Christians with courage; every Christian needs to have this kind of courage, the courage of our convictions, the courage to stand up for our faith and be counted among the people of God, courage to hold onto and live out Christian values and standards. It is so often easier to keep quiet, to say nothing, to hide in a corner as Esther might have been tempted to do. “I don’t feel very brave!” She didn’t say that! She had the courage to believe that God would help her; she lived out her faith and she rescued her people.

“Is it possible for the community of faith to exist at all in an alternately indifferent and hostile world?” (Eugene Peterson) “Can the Church survive?” Living on this side of the resurrection, we believe that the power of God which raised Jesus is at work on our behalf and in us. See what Jesus can do: He can do much more than we ask or imagine; Jesus has the Church in His hands, He has the world in His hands, He has everything in His hands and He is able to help us and save us. God is at work in our world; God is at work in His Church. This little set of stories has been meant to show us people who have lived out their faith in a hard and hostile world; be inspired by people like Esther! There are Christians in the world who walk in her shoes, who face death for being the people of God. We admire their courage and can be inspired by their courage; we need to have the courage to believe in Jesus and keep believing; we need to have the courage to stand up for that faith and its values; we need to have the courage to live out that faith when the world tells you that you are mad! Be inspired by this: “*Now to Him...*” (Eph 3:20)