



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's reading

Esther 6:14—7:10 (“Haman’s Downfall and Mordecai’s Advancement”)

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 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.’ 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. 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.’ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, ‘Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?’ Esther said, ‘A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!’ Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, ‘Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?’ As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. 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.’ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Will you come and follow me* (CH533)
- 2 *Dear Lord and Father of mankind* (CH485)
- 3 *All my hope on God is founded* (CH192i)
- 4 *Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart* (CH:465)
- 5 *Immortal, invisible, God only wise* (CH:132)

In the Name of the Father and of

The Bible has lots of books in it. The version we use has 39 books in the Old Testament (covering the “BC” years) and 27 books in the New Testament (which is all to do with Jesus and what came next).

Imagine someone coming up to me, the minister, and asking me a direct and very simple question: “The Bible: what’s it all about?” I might take a moment to gather my thoughts in that theological corner of my brain. And then, with complete sincerity, drawing on my three years at Divinity college and a couple of decades in and around different parishes, I would almost certainly offer the single-word answer, “God”. And with that, my questioner might very well nod sagely before saying, “Yes, I thought that. Cheerio!”

But then, as my questioner and I headed off in our different directions I might suddenly stop in my tracks, furrow my brow and turn round to shout: “Wait a minute: it’s mostly to do with God, except for some bits ... like the book of Esther.”

The story of Esther makes it into the Old Testament even although it never once mentions God. And in case you are wondering, I can tell you that on Monday I checked for myself ... not a single mention of God is to be found from the first verse of the book of Esther to the last. Some people have wondered why the book gets to be there at all. With no mention of God in the story, what’s the point? Well, one point of keeping the story of Esther in the Bible is that we get to learn about how Esther keeps faith alive at a time when it might have been snuffed out like a candle flickering in the terrible darkness.

Although a strange little book, it has to be said that Esther gives us, in its own way, a really important Bible story. Here is a book that celebrates one brave young woman’s loyalty to her people, as she risks everything to defend them from death in the very toughest of times. The book has been described as, “a story of tenacious courage and of a willingness to hope against all odds”. And that in itself is pretty strong stuff.

So what’s Esther all about? Here we have a classic tale of goodies and baddies. It’s just like a Disney cartoon except – thankfully – without the songs. The goodie, as you will have guessed by now, is a woman named Esther who married Xerxes, the powerful King of Persia. Now Esther was Jewish, and the Jewish people in Persia were anything but powerful, having been sent there in exile. Esther’s uncle Mordecai was the leader of the Jews and he encouraged his niece to hide away her religious beliefs and practices from the King and his advisors. And that is exactly what she did, fearing that things could turn nasty if the royal court got to know about her faith.

As for the baddie in this tale, that would be a bloke called Haman who had become the King’s Prime Minister. He was full of himself and had even decided that everyone in Persia should be made to bow down before him. But Esther’s uncle Mordecai said that just wasn’t on – Jews would bend the knee to no-one but God. This made the Prime Minister very angry. He went to the King and asked for permission to have the Jews put to death.

So it was that all the Jews were to be killed. This, as you can imagine, put Esther in a really difficult spot. She was young and she was scared. Eventually she decided that she had to go to her husband, the King. Xerxes asked Esther what she wanted. She said that, first, she wanted a banquet organized for the following day. At this grand event she would tell the King exactly what it was that she really wanted. Everyone loves a party so both Xerxes and his Prime Minister agreed to come along to the banquet of the clever young Queen.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

That same day Haman spotted Mordecai at the King's gate. Once again, the leader of the Jews refused to bow down to the Prime Minister, who was furious at this insolence and decided there and then that he would order the construction of a gallows on which to execute Mordecai – and soon.

That night the King was in bed, remembering that some years ago Mordecai, the man who refused to bow down, had helped to uncover a plot to stage a revolution. But, thought the King, Mordecai had never been rewarded for his help. Something should be done.

And so, next morning in true Disney style, we find the plot thickening. Just as Haman was arriving to ask for Mordecai to be put to death on the newly-built gallows, the King came to him with a puzzling question: “What should be done for the man the King delights to honour?” Haman, as you can imagine, was an arrogant individual, and he made the mistake of thinking the King was meaning him. So, thinking he was on to a very good thing, he replied: “For the man the king delights to honour, have them bring a royal robe the King has worn and a horse the King has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. . . . Let them robe the man the king delights to honour, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!’”

“Go at once,” commanded the King. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for . . . *[dramatic pause]* . . . Mordecai the Jew!”

What? All that for Mordecai???. Haman could do nothing but obey his boss (though like any Disney villain, deep inside he was very, very upset). Mordecai, his sworn enemy, was being honoured by the King. This was beyond belief!

That night at the great banquet, Esther did what she had to do, courageously telling her husband that she herself was a Jew. Then she went further, begging the King to spare her people. He agreed, and Mordechai was spared the gallows, though Haman . . . was not.

Brave Queen Esther became a hero of her nation from that day to this. Her story made it into the Bible so that future generations (including our own) could remember her willingness to own her faith. She could have stayed quiet but then the Prime Minister would have had his way with all the Jewish people of Persia killed in a terrible act of mass murder. But no: brave, young Esther wanted to do all she could to save lives that were under threat from a cruel man. She spoke out for her people by speaking out for God.

All across the world there are men and women who face religious persecution at the hands of wicked leaders. This has happened over the centuries to many communities of faith: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and many others. Whenever it happens, it is always wrong, and sadly these terrible acts are still going on in our own day.

But people like Esther show us a better way. In her case, at huge personal risk, she outed herself as a member of the Jewish people, and did what it took to save her people from annihilation. Would we be ready to out ourselves as followers of Jesus in a similar situation, risking placing ourselves in the firing line to protect our neighbours in danger? That kind of selfless action is always such a risky thing to do, yet in Esther’s case by taking a stand for justice in the face of oppression, God put one young woman’s bravery to good use.

This was a Queen who would risk everything by speaking out for her faith at a time of deep peril in order to those she loved. Perhaps our own faith can be put to work in the same way to achieve amazing results . . . if we let it. Amen.

Praying for others

Our Father, one God, Creator of all,
with you in charge we too can be courageous.
We can trust in your power to help us carry out your will.
Confident in your love, we need not fear what people might do to us.

In our world of religious persecution, racial hatred,
forced obedience, oppression and abuse of power,
grant us the wisdom to uphold what is true and good
by humbly standing against what is wrong.

Rooted in our faith, we can follow Esther's example
by stepping forward thoughtfully, prayerfully, bravely and boldly.

We long to proclaim our faith
by showing your love at work in us
through firm, decisive action for
the welfare of others, putting self last.

Outnumbered and powerless, feeling helpless,
we thank you for carefully guiding us,
through your Son Jesus Christ who shows us
the way of righteousness by self-sacrifice and humility.

Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill thinks about changes to come and a biblical assurance for these hard times:
Some people relish the prospect of change, while others live in fear of things being different. On balance, I suppose I find myself in the former camp believing, as I do, that nothing stays the same for too long, so we might as well enjoy the ride ... if we can.

Everyone knows that society is heading in the direction of “the new normal”, though it remains a major task to pin down just what that might be and when it might finally arrive for us all. With Covid-19 still an ever-present reality all round the globe, we struggle to see beyond the horizon of our current experience. And with reported infections forming something of a rollercoaster graph at present, who could be brave enough to make any kind of prediction as to when that mythical “normality” might come our way?

For me, this autumn is a time of real challenge as I think about how to do old things in a “hybrid” way. This month I take over as moderator of Lothian Presbytery, chairing meetings of ministers and elders from all across East Lothian and Midlothian. Will I be able to carry out my new duties in the home of our Presbytery, St Andrew's High Parish Church in Musselburgh? Or will I be convening our meetings looking into the lens of a camera???

For you, there might be all sorts of similar but different uncertainties on your mind, whether over childcare, education, work, needs of elderly parents, or just anxiety over visiting the cinema or going out for a drink. Things may become less restricted than they were in 2020, but will they become any easier to handle? It's a big question. At times such as these the Bible can come to our aid, so dwell on these words: ... *do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you ... (Isaiah 41:10 (NRSV))*