

Taking Charge

Opening Prayer

O God, giver of life, of all our days, of this moment now, open our hearts and minds as we hear your voice through your word; may we listen carefully, think clearly and speak truthfully, growing in wisdom and in love for you and one another.

Amen.

Bible Passage

Esther 3: 1 -11, 15; 4: 1 -17

Exegesis

Having enjoyed the writer's mockery of Ahasuerus and his court, we find a new character appearing. Haman's rise to power and adoption of Ahasuerus' ruling 'style' cause no surprise, and we may approach this scene

with similarly comic expectations. However, with the backdrop unaltered, a darkness presaged by the Vashti narrative descends, and we are confronted by the question waiting to be asked: where is God in the story? Esther is the only book in the Bible where God is not named nor does religion feature: the Jews are treated as an ethnic group, while fully integrated into Persian society.

Like Esther and Mordecai, Haman is not of Persian origin, but descended from a historic enemy of Israel (see for example, 1 Samuel 15). Mordecai will not give him obeisance. His reasoning is not clear, but he could be motivated by historic animosity, or by pride (he had just saved the king's life, why wasn't he promoted instead?), but equally because to bow to another human is tantamount to idolatry: to God alone do we bend the knee. Does his hidden faith motivate him here? Whatever the cause, his 'no' recalls Vashti's and its consequences for all women; but this is worse, it has potential genocidal repercussions for all Jews. The tension mounts. No longer are we amused when Haman determines the start date by casting lots (Purim gives its name to the festival celebrating the Jews' eventual salvation), or when money changes hands – for Christians another deadly story resonates. While the whole city is in confusion as the news spreads, Ahasuerus and Haman break open the champagne.

There follows another key turning point in the story. Mordecai in mourning dress presents Esther (through intermediaries – sadness is denied entry to the court) with a stark choice: 'use your position to plead for us with the king, or die'. To do so would reveal her Jewish identity, hitherto also hidden. She needs evidence, so Mordecai sends her the written text of the edict, the first indication that Esther is educated and intelligent. From here on, she takes charge, no longer the submissive daughter and wife but the courageous leader of her people. She accepts it as her vocation, to 'have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this'. And she commands her people to come together to support her daring action by fasting, perhaps with sacred intent.

Reflection

The writer again exposes a human weakness, that 'power tends to corrupt' (Lord Acton). Jewish writer Robert Caro has qualified it: 'Power doesn't always corrupt. Power can cleanse. What I believe is always true about power is that power reveals.' We see this in the Esther story as it unfolds. In our day, the locus of power is shifting. As well as its negative effects, the internet and social media have gifted voiceless people (us!) with power to uncover truths others want to hide. How is, or can, this be used constructively by Christians for good?

Haman's desire for 'ethnic cleansing' resonates with our own world: the Holocaust, Bosnia, Rwanda. As in the Persia of Esther's time, integrated communities living peaceably are easily manipulated by an 'us' and 'them' rhetoric with tragic consequences. Peace is fragile. Many communities in the UK live 'parallel lives' but not out of choice. God gave us a vision of community where diverse people live in harmony seeking 'the welfare of the city', praying 'on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare;' (Jeremiah 29. 7). Try to see 'with God's eyes' how we might facilitate authentic 'community cohesion' where we are.

Discussion questions

1. Although absent by name from the story, how do you think God might have been guiding Esther's life so that she was the right, and only, person to have any chance of saving her people? Have there been times when you've felt something similar yourself? Share these experiences and how God may have been using you.
2. Have you ever felt God to be 'in hiding'? Most of us do! If you're able to, talk about these situations and how you now understand them. (*It may help you here to read the poems by R. S. Thomas listed below*)

Suggestions for further reading

Timothy K. Beal: *The Book of Hiding. Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther* (Routledge, 1997)
On genocide:

Patrick Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed* (Continuum, 2009)

Mary Grey, *To Rwanda and Back: Liberation, Spirituality and Reconciliation* (DLT, 2007)

On God's hiding:

R.S. Thomas's poems: *Via Negativa* and *The Absence* (*Collected Poems 1945-1990*, Phoenix 1993. And in many anthologies)

Closing Prayer

O God, help us to trust you when you seem absent; as we look back on the events of each day, give us the insight to discern your presence with us. Bless all who suffer persecution, and guide us to the places we can bring love and peace in your name. Amen.

This resource was written by Anne Phillips. Anne is a Baptist minister, now living in beautiful Derbyshire after spending many years working as an educator in churches and a theological college.