

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Pentecost 18

(b-os26)

26 September 2021

Readings: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 20-22
James 5:12-20; Psalm 124;
Mark 9:38-50.

'Courage, Discernment and Integrity'

Salvation Through the Actions of a Woman

The Book of Esther reads like the plot of a Baroque opera. It is set in 3rd century BC Persia and involves political intrigue, deception, wars and threats of wars, love and betrayal, murder, and the possibility of genocide. It is also a story of courage.

The narrative begins with a royal feast in King Ahasuerus' grand palace. The King (also known as Artaxerxes) called for his Queen, Vashti, to parade before his guests but she refused. She was subsequently dismissed, and another queen was chosen. Enter our heroine Esther, a woman who had secretly come from a political underclass, the Jews.

The villain was Haman, whom the King had appointed Prime Minister. Haman had an ego the size of a universe and required people to bow to him as he passed by. Some refused to do this, including Queen Esther's cousin Mordecai. Haman was angry and plotted revenge on Mordecai and all the Jews - it was to become an act of genocide. To facilitate his plan he constructed gallows upon which to hang Mordecai.

Another feast was held, and on this occasion Queen Esther revealed to the King that she was a Jew and pleaded for the salvation of her people. She also identified Haman as one who was plotting against the King. Ahasuerus was enraged and storm out.

Haman then went to Esther to seek mercy, but the King returned and misinterpreted Haman's actions as an assault upon the Queen. In an act of irony, he had Haman hanged on the gallows prepared for Mordecai.

Mordecai later became an official in the King's court. The book describes him establishing the Jewish feast of Purim (or lots) that celebrates the salvation of God's people through the courageous actions of Esther. It is interesting, at this point, to note that the Hebrew Scriptures contain several stories of courageous women who became the means of salvation for God's people.

Discerning the Truth

No doubt, you are familiar with the words of the philosopher Edmund Burke who said, ‘all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing’. We have many examples down through history where there has been a failure of people to act for the common good. Even in our own corporate memory there has been the genocide inflicted on the Jews by the German Third Reich, the massacre at Mai Lai during the Viet Nam War, the persecution of ethnic minorities in China and Myanmar, and the ill-treatment of our own First Nations people in Australia.

As Christians, however, we are called to pursue God’s purposes for the world and play our part in the process of salvation by bringing goodness into the lives of those around us, but it is not always easy. It takes courage, discernment, and integrity.

A major problem is the matter of discerning the truth, especially in an age of fake news, image, and spin. Too often there seems to be a greater desire is to look good rather than to do good, which demonstrates a desire for power without responsibility. Yet power must always come with equal responsibility, for people can only (and must be) held to account for those actions over which they have some sort of authority or control.

Failure in our community, business, and political leadership comes because of a breakdown of responsibility and a lack of concern to create a good that lasts beyond the short-term. What is needed to make a difference is a vision and commitment to a ‘greater good’ beyond the needs of immediate power and advantage.

Of course, when it comes to vision, how we choose to look at the world will influence what we see. Much of this arises from the perspective that is taken to look at things. For example, the business of theology is about studying the interaction between God, humanity, and the world. Two basic perspectives may be taken in this process:

1. The first, ‘from above’ tries to view things from God’s perspective, and
2. Second, ‘from below’ looks from the perspective of humanity toward God.

The former is often perceived as being dogmatic, ideological, and authoritarian, while the latter is sometimes seen as limited, ambiguous, and wishy-washy. Our perspectives influence how we choose to understand the world and interpret events in matters of faith, but it is also applicable to other disciplines.

Power, Control and Exclusion

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). This reading from the Gospel of Mark, portrays the disciples as being disturbed by someone who was exercising a ministry but who was not part of their group. They perceived their position as under threat from people who were not properly authorised, and they wanted Jesus to put this interloper put back in his place.

Jesus, however, was untroubled and rebuked the disciples, saying: “Whoever is not against us is for us”, thereby offering a new perspective on the situation. He reminded the disciples that God’s activity in the world is not bound by our structures, resources, or desires - which was a bit of a challenge to his hearers.

The disciple’s perspective had been narrowed to an ‘in group’ that believed they understood the truth because of their proximity to Jesus. This is human nature and was demonstrated in the gospels by the arrogance of the Pharisees, who Jesus often criticised. It is a view that is never far from any one of us. Indeed, it would seem that where goes exclusion there goes the Pharisee!

The Gospel of Mark pursues a theme that portrays the failure and confusion of the disciples. Too often they seemed to misunderstand Jesus and his mission, even when the crowds and outsiders could comprehend it. The disciples were bewildered and yet they argued about greatness, power, and authority. Perhaps it was their insecurity that drove them. Nevertheless, ‘in groups’ create ‘out groups’, which has often been the source of abuse, ill-treatment, persecution, and genocide down through history.

Christians spend a lot of time worrying about each other. It is not only on matters of who is the greatest and issues of authority, but also around who are the true ‘chosen ones’ of God. This usually segues into a ‘top down’ view of believing the ‘right things’ and doing the ‘right things’, resulting in the exclusion or condemnation of those who don’t measure up to our standards or who disagree with us. But it happens elsewhere.

You may remember former United States President George W. Bush, who in a fit of messianic hubris, proclaimed that “if you are not with me then you are against me”. He went on to lead much of the western world into an invasion of Iraq (formerly part of Ahasuerus’ Persia) searching for legendary weapons of mass destruction followed by an incursion into Afghanistan looking for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Bush sought to put a wedge between those who would follow him and those who disagreed. Jesus, on the other hand, made a much more inclusive and positive statement: “Whoever is not against us is for us” – thereby accepting those who sought to do the work of the kingdom, including those who were not part of the ‘in group’. This was a generous and hospitable statement that tended to give power away rather than draw it to himself or his group of followers.

The challenge here, as is often the case in the gospels, is to look at our motivations. The way of the world is to seek power, control, and popularity, but Jesus both taught and demonstrated a better way, calling us to be the servants of all. Like the disciples, we can miss the point by being too focused on ourselves and our own needs, rather than the needs of those around us or the calling of God. To be sure, we can fail both to perceive and bring about God’s Kingdom because we do not seek it.

Let Your ‘Yes’ be Yes

So, what does the Kingdom of God look like?

The Letter of James has been described as a piece of Christian ‘wisdom literature’ that relates the practical outworking of faith in communal life. It is not written to any particular person or church group but is a general statement of how to live the Christian faith, and its basic premise is that love is central to what we do as Christians. The Letter describes what a community of love looks like.

We have had excerpts of the Letter of James as part of our Sunday readings for the past five weeks. In short, the Letter advocates that Christians should live lives of integrity toward God and each other. This means that that we should do the following:

- not show favouritism to the rich and powerful,
- nor should we gossip or tell lies,
- nor should we be greedy and self-seeking,
- nor should we judge one another, and
- nor should we defraud others, but rather we should be honest in all things.

Today’s reading states that Christians should not need to make oaths because when we say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ we should mean it and hold to our word. This suggests something stronger than a contract, which is something our Commonwealth Government leaders might well go and think about at this time!

Finally, the Letter exhorts the reader to be prayerful so that we may become the people that God wants us to be. Jesus taught his followers to be transformed rather than informed. The good news was therefore to be found in the relationship that the disciples developed with him rather than any of the ideas that they had about him, or even because of the things they did – important as they may be. Our calling therefore remains one of changing the world by living out the nature of God’s rule in our midst, and it will sometimes require us to take risks.

Queen Esther risked her own life by telling the King about the pending destruction of her people and thereby saved them. It was an act of speaking the truth to power. For us, it is about setting aside personal desires and taking up the challenge of seeking the common good, so that all may find benefit. We therefore need to learn to be vulnerable, rather than trying to control those around us. To be sure, it is not about trying to win at every opportunity, nor is it about asserting a right to religious freedom, but rather it is about accepting who we are and seeking to be faithful followers of Christ – it is a matter of integrity.