

Julie's sermon on Esther – 19th July 2020

I don't know about you but I am really enjoying this sermon series because I am learning new things about people in the bible that I hadn't given much thought to. I had a little bit of knowledge about Gideon, Solomon and Hannah but now I feel like I know them much better thanks to David and Debby! If I'm honest I knew a bit more about Noah, Ruth and Esther, which is why when I did the rota I chose them to preach about, but even so I now know a bit more about them too. This morning we are continuing with our series by looking at what Esther can teach us.

There is one thing about the Book of Esther which divides the theologians and that is that God is not mentioned anywhere! Some commentators have said it shouldn't be in the bible at all because it is simply a tale of good triumphing over evil - the stuff of legends and fairytales. But others say that God is intrinsic to the whole story! The Jews remember Esther every year during the Feast of Purim. Purim is a minor holiday, but that doesn't mean it's not important. It reminds them how God used a young Jewish woman to intervene on their behalf and deliver them from almost certain death in Babylon. So in my very humble opinion whilst God may not be mentioned he was certainly at work in Esther's life! If you haven't read the book of Esther it is worth a read as I can't give you the whole story this morning!!

Esther was an orphan brought up by her cousin Mordecai and she found favour with Xerxes, King of Persia, and he wanted to take her as one of his wives and make her queen!

For Esther this was an opportunity too good to miss, but Mordecai advised her that she needed to keep her Jewish roots a secret, because the Jews were slaves in Babylon and she may not be chosen as queen if the king found out! She loved and respected Mordecai and valued his opinion and advice and so she did as he asked; but then came a drastic change in circumstances that forced her to think again.

A young man called Haman, had been promoted to high office, second only to the king himself, and all subjects were ordered to bow in homage before him. For Mordecai, and his Jewish friends this was impossible because it was tantamount to idolatry, so he refused the command, and as a result the infuriated Haman plotted to destroy not just Mordecai but every Jew within Persia.

He persuaded the king to agree to his plan, and throughout the empire, Jews waited in terror for the slaughter to begin.

Could anyone help to avert this disaster? There was just one possibility and it revolved around Esther. As wife to the king, she alone might be in a position to influence him and rescue her people. Yet it was not a simple matter, for no wife of the king, not even a queen, was allowed to approach him unbidden. Anyone going into the inner court without an invitation was almost certainly doomed to die. Only the king could offer leniency and spare Esther's life if she chose to go and see him to plead for her people. We cannot begin to imagine the battle that must have gone on in Esther's head and heart - wrestling with inner fears of her own fate on the one hand and her conscience about her people on the other. She could keep quiet and perhaps save her own neck at the cost of her people, or she could plead their cause and risk the very real prospect of death.

It must have seemed like an impossible dilemma, but then came another message from Mordecai, and with it a challenge that was to throw new light on the situation, helping her to see it not so much as a quandary but as a God-given opportunity. Mordecai's message said "Perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this". Here was a suggestion that brought a new factor into the equation, enabling her to view it from an altogether different perspective. Perhaps God had put her where she was for a reason. Perhaps catching the king's eye and becoming his wife hadn't just been fate but part of God's purpose, leading to this moment. Esther knew she needed God to help her and to show her what she needed to do and so she fasted and prayed, and asked Mordecai to get the rest of the Jews to do the same.

During the period of fasting and praying God revealed to Esther what she needed to do, and inspired by the knowledge that God could use her, she found the courage to save her people. 'I will go to the king,' she said, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish' (Esther 4:16b, NRSV). The time had come to speak out, to fling aside her reservations and toss caution to the wind. So she made herself beautiful ready to go before the King - if God had his part to play then she had to play her part too - but she knew ultimately that her fate was in divine hands, not her own.

If you read the book of Esther you will find out what happens to her, to Haman and to Mordecai and I am going to leave it as a bit of a cliffhanger for you but I will say that Esther's absolute trust in God meant that the Jews were saved that day and that is why she is remembered at Purim.

What I want us to think about is that trust Esther had in God. She knew if she went to see the king then she was facing almost certain death as were her people but she couldn't just sit back and hope that someone else might help. She needed God to show her what to do and then she had to trust in his answer! Without question she was putting herself in God's hands!

How many times have we asked God to help us and then when he answers us we can't follow through because we don't like the answer, and so we just do what we want anyway! We all do it! It's human nature!! But trusting God has to be our priority – but how do we know what he wants us to do?

Have you ever had that feeling deep down in your gut – you can call it butterflies if you want to or cramp if it makes you feel better but it is probably God telling you that he has heard you and what you are planning to do is right; even if you're not sure and he will be there with you.

Or have you ever felt uneasy but don't know why – maybe it is because God is saying don't do it; that's not the way I want you to go!!

Have you ever thought that a friend's advice is exactly what you needed to hear – God uses those around us to get his message through

Have you ever come up against so many obstacles that you wonder why you keep on trying – maybe God is putting things in the way because you are not following his ways!

We have to listen to God – especially if we have asked him for help!!

I know I have said this before but God has a plan for each one of us just as he did for Noah, Solomon, Gideon, Ruth, Hannah and Esther and he puts us in the right place at the right time to fulfil that plan we just need to trust him and do what he is asking!

But we have to be prepared to be surprised! Trust me, I know. When Pete died I asked God what he wanted me to do and it led me to being ordained and ultimately to being here in Huddersfield – it was surprising but I never doubt that he knew what he was doing!!

What about you? Do you need to ask God what he wants you to do – if so give it a try – ask him but you need to be prepared to act on the answer – whatever it might be because it might change your life and the lives of others forever!

As I keep saying God has a plan and you are part of that plan just like the men and women of the bible!!

Amen