

King's College Chapel Cambridge 24th April 2016, Sung Eucharist, 10:30am

Women of Spirit: Esther

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our Strength and Redeemer.

The woman of spirit I have chosen for this morning, is Esther, a young orphaned Jewish girl living within a community of Jews in Persia, who, even though they had been freed from slavery, chose not to return to Jerusalem, but stay in Persia among their former captors. When the story begins, in the fourth century B.C., a powerful king, Xerxes the first, is on the throne.

There are so many intriguing things about the Book, or Scroll, of Esther, as it is called in the Jewish tradition - how it was written, with later Greek additions to the original Hebrew text, and how it came to be included in the canon, which was not until the eighth century A.D. It is, famously, the only book in the Bible in which God is not mentioned at all, and yet, the action and events throughout the book speak powerfully of Esther's faith and of her identification with her people, to the point of risking her own life.

The book starts with a banquet, put on by the king for his princes and the nobles and officials in all the provinces in his kingdom. The banquet lasts, we are told, for one hundred and eighty days, and Xerxes uses that time to reinforce his position by parading his wealth and splendour and opulence. At the same time, Xerxes' Queen Vashti throws a banquet for all the women in the palace. At the end of the final banquet, when Xerxes has had much to drink, he sends for Vashti, in order to show off her beauty. She refuses to leave her banquet and be put on show for the princes and nobles. Xerxes is furious, takes advice from his counsellors, and banishes the queen, in case other women follow her example and refuse their husband's commands.

He sends his chief eunuch out into the streets to scout out new beautiful young virgins, and this is when Esther enters the story. She is spotted, taken to the palace and put in a harem, in the custody of the chief eunuch. We are not told whether she went willingly or whether she was, in effect, abducted. She is not immediately shown to the king, but spends a whole year in the harem being beautified, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments. That may sound like heaven to some of us, but Esther would have known the stakes were high. If the king didn't like her, she would be out: if he did, she could possibly become a favoured concubine among many others and maybe, just maybe, the new queen. When Esther is finally presented to the king, all glowing, fragrant and dressed in fine silks, he completely falls for her. The story says the king loved Esther more than all the women, that she found grace and favour in his sight: he crowns her queen instead of Vashti.

So far, so good, but over the next few years the king's highest official, Haman, a devious, ambitious and evil man, who hates the Jews, grows to hate Esther's guardian Mordecai most

of all, because, as a Jew, Mordecai will not bow down to Haman when they meet in the public square. Also, because some time earlier Mordecai had foiled an assassination attempt on the king's life, and the king had honoured him, in public. Haman hatches a plot to kill Mordecai and all the Jews in the kingdom. Of course, at this point neither Haman nor the king knows that Esther is also a Jew. The action unfolds, and reaches a crisis when Haman manages to get the king to sign a warrant authorizing the annihilation of all the Jews.

Together, through messengers, Esther and Mordecai have been able to stay in touch and they discuss what Esther, in her privileged position, can possibly do to save their people. When Esther tells Mordecai that she has not been summoned to the king for a month, he reminds her that, come the day of slaughter, her identity will be revealed, and she will be killed with all the rest. He challenges her with a question: 'who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'

Mordecai's question galvanizes Esther. She devises a strategy, asks Mordecai to get all the Jews to fast for three days for her, she fasts, then begins the first step of her entrapment of Haman and the exposure of his murderous intentions. Haman has already had the gallows built on which he cannot wait to hang Mordecai.

Esther's plan is incredibly brave and incredibly risky. Instead of relying on her position, her beauty, her favour with the king, she places her own life at risk by going to see the king, without first being summoned. If the king holds out his golden sceptre, she may approach him; if not, she will be killed.

Through a series of carefully staged events, Esther exposes Haman's intentions, has his edict overturned and saves her people. Haman and his ten sons end up on the gallows built for Mordecai. The king gives Esther Haman's home and Mordecai is elevated to Haman's former position. The day on which the Jews were to be killed becomes, instead, the day on which all the Persians who are known to be hostile to the Jews, are killed - a very public sign that the king has put his seal of approval on the continued presence of the Jews in his kingdom. For the Jews, it is a sign that God is with them.

In great joy and thanksgiving, the Jews celebrate their escape from death, and the festival known as Purim is instituted, still celebrated to this day, on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, which fell this year, in the Gregorian calendar, on the 23rd and 24th of March.

It would have been so easy for Esther to play it safe, to shift her loyalty to her husband and his people, to stay cocooned in her pampered, privileged world, safe and secure, as long as she followed the rules and remained in favour. But Esther was willing to sacrifice all of that for something more precious and important to her than her own life. Her choices revealed, not only her intelligence, courage and determination, but also that she had never stopped

seeing herself, even after years of living in a sumptuous palace as Xerxes' queen, as one of God's chosen people, called, above all else, to be faithful to the one true God.

In being willing to risk her life for her people, Esther did remain faithful to God, she saved her people, and retained her own integrity, the core understanding of who she knew herself to be. In that, we hear advance echoes of words spoken several hundred years later: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will gain it. For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

Christina Rees

24th April 2016