



15 May 2016  
Pentecost Sunday  
Choral Evensong  
Esther 8 vv. 1–13  
Luke 1 vv. 26–38

## **Esther: harems, hangmen and heroines**

By Jayne Ozanne

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Tucked in, almost as an afterthought, between the historic Exile books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the epic poetry book of Job, lies a little known book called, Esther - all 10 chapters and 168 verses of it. It's one of just two books that bear a woman's name in the 66 book library that we call the Bible. The other of course being, Ruth.

Christians mark it out for the fact that the name of God does not occur at all within the text, although the Hand of God is clearly at work throughout the whole story. He is also a central part of the lives of the two lead characters – well, the “good ones” at any rate. Both are the most unlikely of leads - Mordecai, a Jewish Benjamite in exile and Esther, his adopted orphaned cousin. Neither have much to mark them out as obvious heroes and heroines that will help save a nation. However, without them there would have arguably been no Nehemiah, no Jewish people and ultimately no Christ. Ask any Jewish child to tell you who Esther is, and she or he will avidly tell you the story behind the Feast of Purim that is celebrated every year a month before Passover. It's a mandatory celebration for the vast majority of Jews, where the children dress up as their favourite characters, are allowed to shout and stamp their feet during the reciting of the text, and the adults are encouraged to “let their hair down”, drink and be jolly – sounds reminiscent of a College Feast!

To be fair, this story from the Jewish exile period reads rather like a Shakespearean play – or perhaps more accurately a Hollywood blockbuster. Esther is chosen during a nationwide beauty pageant to help the King of Persia ostensibly find a new Queen. The truth is that it reads a bit more like an X-rated X Factor, where young virgins are given 12 months beauty treatments before being sent in for a night with the King so that he can then decide who – out of 100s of virgins - he wants as his primary consort (yes, this really is in the Bible!). Esther makes good use of her giftings – that is her charm and her beauty, and heeds the advice of the two men in her life – her uncle, Mordecai, who has told her not to reveal her lineage and the King's Eunuch, Hegai, who tells her how best to woo the King. Inevitably she becomes Queen and therefore finds herself in a critically important position of influence - which is rather useful when Mordecai finds out that there's a plot

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to exterminate the Jews. This has been hatched by the wicked Haman, the King's Number 2, who definitely has it in for Mordecai and decides to build a gallows to have him killed. Mordecai prevails on Esther to try and save the Jews, with two of the most memorable verses in the book:

*“Do not think in your heart that you will escape the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”*

The story is therefore about God's providence and favour; which requires a certain amount of “wit, wisdom and willingness” from the heroine to fulfil. Esther goes on to bravely bait the King, and invites him and Haman to a banquet – two nights in a row. Wisely waiting until the second night, when the King is hooked and keen to offer her almost anything, she pleads for her life and that of her people, revealing Haman's dark plot to annihilate them all. The King is incensed, and demands that Haman is hoisted on his own petard – or more accurately, hung on his own gallows. As we heard, Mordecai is then given his job, Esther his household, and the two of them are empowered to find a clever way of saving their people, without revoking the king's decree to kill them. (This was because, similar to another political institution a little closer to home, the Persians had no way of revoking a decree once it had been agreed.) The Jews are pre-warned – thanks to the deployment of some royal racehorses – about their impending plight, and are therefore able to arm and protect themselves. It always strikes me as rather unfortunate that over seventy-five thousand Persians then die, a small little fact hidden away in the text, but the Jewish line is saved – and what's more many decide to become Jews. The two-day Festival of Purim is then instigated, which as I mentioned is still celebrated today.

Esther was a courageous woman, who used her unique gifts in the place she found herself favoured to be, in order to save a nation. The Bible is full of such women, though few have books named after them. Deborah the Judge, Jael who kills the Commander of the King of Canaan's army with a tent peg, Zipporah the wife of Moses, Rahab the prostitute – the list goes on, until we reach of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus. As we heard in our second reading - which is rarely heard outside the seasons of Advent and Christmas – this young virgin's life is suddenly turned upside down by an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

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I think sometimes we forget, perhaps due to our familiarity with the text, how utterly extraordinary Mary's response actually is. Over 400 long years have passed since the last of the 1Prophets, Malachi, foretells the return of a Elijah. Alexander the Great has been and gone, the Temple has been defiled, the Jews have revolted and then been suppressed by the Romans, who are now firmly in charge. It's therefore a period of great oppression for the Jews, secular forces are strong – and faith is in short supply. The promise of their long awaited Redeemer seems all but a dream. And yet, Mary believes. It is her one gift, the gift of faith. She – an unknown young woman – has an encounter with the Living God, unlike anything that anyone has had before. She is indeed favoured, and her response is also one of wit, wisdom and willingness. *“How shall this be?”* she immediately asks, before her courageous acquiescence: *“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”* Another woman positioned for such a time as this.

Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, ten days after Jesus' Ascension. It is a critical day for us, the Church, as it marks how Christ pours out his Spirit into each one of us – so that we can literally become his body here on earth. He is no longer just one man limited to one physical place at one time, but is now present – through His Spirit - the world over, for all time. Paul explains in his first letter to the Corinthians that there are various gifts of the Spirit, and that these are given to each one of us in differing measures for the profit of all. As also Peter recalls, the Prophet Joel tells us that Christ's Spirit is poured out *“on all flesh...sons and daughters will prophesy; young men shall see visions; old men shall dream dreams; even on my servants and handmaidens.”* There are no exceptions, and no caveat clauses. We are *all* included in the blessing – all part of the Beloved.

And this is a theme that various courageous Christian Johnians have taken deeply to heart over the years:

**William Wilberforce**, who fought so hard to reform the social order of his day, to abolish the slave trade. Using his place of favour with William Pitt, his friend and confidant, to influence change and take on a Church that saw slavery as Biblical.

**Donald Coggan**, the 101<sup>st</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the earliest supporters of women's ordination to the priesthood, and the first to formally propose it at a Lambeth Conference in 1970 - sadly it took another 24 years to come to pass.

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**Alan Wilson**, the current Bishop of Buckingham, who is our lead champion within the Christian LGBT community here in the UK, and with whom I – another Johnian - work to ensure that the Church embraces all, accepts all, serves and honours all.

I must admit that when I was doing some background research for this talk, I found it really depressing that in the eight pages of names of influential Johnians listed on Wikipedia, there is only one female name. Yes, I know we've only been admitted to college since 1981, it was very recent memory when I was here, but we have been quite active since then! Hidden (and not so hidden) women of favour and influence, courageously using their wit, wisdom and willingness to serve and change our world.

I remember reflecting at our first inaugural meeting of the **Archbishops' Council**, a body that oversees central strategy and resources for the Church of England on which I was privileged to serve as a founding Member, that it was a disgrace that only three out of the nineteen of us were women.

Interestingly, this is a topic that Wilberforce himself spoke out about:

*"Both man and woman have their own parts to play in bringing faith to the next generation, and the woman's role is particularly important. How can we ever think that the female sex is inferior when we see the essential responsibility God has given women in this world? Their sensitivity to spiritual concerns seems to be far more innate and natural than a man's....we should all be careful to avail ourselves of the benefits they have to offer both the present generation and the one that will follow."*

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, the odds of serving alongside women had been far better when I'd been on the Board of Presentation at BBC Television, and continued to be so when I was later at Oxfam and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation – where both my Chief Execs were women. That is why, when I set up the Global Girls Fund with HRH Princess Benedikte of Denmark for the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, I did so believing that women can frequently provide a unique form of leadership that is often far more nuanced – applying their gifts in a more empathetic and collaborative style. This is behind the concept of "Good Disagreement" that I am currently championing, at some cost, to help the Church through its fractious and painful discussions about human sexuality.



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Christ gifts us uniquely and differently, and I believe it is beholden on us all to recognise, embrace and celebrate this difference. I also believe it is beholden on each of us, as individuals, to willingly accept and develop our unique giftings, using them as best we can to the glory of God for the benefit of all – wherever we find ourselves, whatever position of influence or leadership we're favoured with.

For Esther her gifting was her beauty, which she utilised so charmingly to the full, knowing that in doing so it could cost her her life. For Mary it was her faith, which arguably cost her her reputation – at least during her pregnancy. There is *always* a risk, as I myself know when I chose to come out as a leading gay Christian at the risk of losing my reputation, family and friends. Being prepared to sacrifice what is most dear to us requires courage, which in turn requires faith.

But remember faith is a gift from God, which is given to us by grace. An inner confidence or knowing that our Lord is real, true and trustworthy – for He *is* love.

So at this time of Pentecost, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of His Spirit – of his gifts of grace. What is it that you most need? I think “wit and wisdom” are probably here aplenty, but Faith? Courage? Willingness to serve?

So ask, and believe that you will receive. For it is my firm conviction - that has taken me by faith into the White House, into the heart of the Middle Eastern Peace Process, even to smuggling aid into the jungles of Burma and the hills of Nagorno-Karabakh - that “*with God nothing shall be impossible*”.

Amen.