

**Archbishop Aspinall's
Sermon for Evensong, Anglicare Conference 2009**

Esther 3.8-11, 15 – 4.5, 12-14

I came across a description of the Book of Esther as *The Bold and the Biblical*, playing on its tale of power, passion, intrigue and family. And it is all that – there are plots and intrigues, feasts and political machinations, murder, betrayal, arch villains and embarrassing family members, and of course a beautiful leading lady who learns to use her wiles to persuade the king to do as she asks. With the right hair and costumes, it would be a daytime hit.

But there is a serious discourse in the book of Esther. There is racism, the threat of genocide, and a morality tale against pride and ambition. The great challenge which faces Esther is that of taking on the responsibility which goes hand in hand with the privilege which has accrued to her. It is also a story of great reversals of fortune: those who seemed to be on the up and up find themselves suddenly dispossessed, while those who were facing death and destruction just as rapidly find themselves back in the fold.

The book of Esther is set in the Persian Diaspora, and addresses itself to the exiled Jews, bringing a message of hope that the exiles too may find a sudden reversal of fortune, and an assurance that they may find they have allies in unexpected places. The Jews of the story must depend on their queen who, up until now, has been at great pains to remain unnoticed, to blend in and stay safe. She has hidden her Jewish identity, even to the extent of marrying a Gentile and abandoning the laws and customs of her people. She has taken refuge in silence, yet the events overtaking her will show that her only safety lies in finding her voice on behalf of her people.

Astute readers of Esther will have noticed that God does not get a mention in this book. Unlike many stories from the Hebrew Scriptures there are no miracles, no theophanies, just an assortment of humans caught up in their power plays. There is however a real sense of God at work behind the scenes. The Jews are still God's people and God has not abandoned them. It is for prophets like Mordecai, and for Esther herself, to act as God's agents in this world. This is where Esther's story touches our story. For God still entrusts to human agents the work of justice.

Esther is not at first glance a likely candidate for any kind of power. She is very young, probably adolescent, an orphan, from a minority group of refugees in the midst of a dominant culture. And for some time she lives out that powerlessness, having seen already what happened to the last queen who tried to exercise independent power. That queen, Vashti, was executed by order of the king. In the face of planned genocide against her people, however, Esther cannot remain in her isolated safety. At this point she must decide whether to act on behalf of her people, or to remain silent and risk her own death. For Mordecai reminds her that God will not abandon God's people, and that when salvation comes to the Jews they will remember that she did not help them.

While this seems like a harsh threat to Esther, it is really no more than the facts. Esther is indelibly connected with her people, whether she acknowledges that connection or not. What happens to the Jews affects her. She has been raised to rank and privilege but it comes at a cost. She must use what power she has not to keep herself safe but to speak on behalf of others.

It is not difficult to connect Esther's advocacy with the role of Anglicare Australia as you also speak up for people who cannot always speak for themselves. The theme of this conference "Global trends, local voices" picks up on this. Anglicare Australia has long acted as an advocate for those who cannot always speak for themselves and in doing this you have acted in the tradition of Esther.

The global issues are all too well known: the protection of children and the aged, those in society who are most vulnerable; the fate of low-income earners in tough financial times; the pressure on not-for-profit organisations in a tight market; indigenous health and welfare. Anglicare Australia has a strong record in these areas and will no doubt continue to advocate for those in need.

The dimension of "Local voices", however, reminds us all of the importance of listening to those on whose behalf we seek to act and speak. There is a significant difference between speaking on behalf of someone and helping them to be heard. I have no doubt you will welcome this opportunity to engage with local voices and to listen to some of the stories. And as you do so I hope that Esther will be there in the background.

The breakthrough for Esther was when she realised that she was not a disinterested party to the sufferings of others. She was connected. She had to act because what affected them affected her. This is not to say she acted selfishly, but that, as John Donne put it, "no man is an island, entire of itself"(Meditation 17). None of us exist in splendid isolation, no matter how much we might like to. Our own humanity is diminished by any injustice done to others.

So we act to address injustice to others because we have no choice. Yet we must allow those who are oppressed or victimised to tell us of their suffering, for to do otherwise is to continue to deny them their full humanity.

My prayer for you all, then, as you begin this conference, is that you will hear and be changed by the local voices that speak to you. With Esther may you discover and treasure the thread which connects you to the other, and rediscover a passion for transforming the world into a more just place.

20 September 2009