

Season of Creation: Power

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10

The book of Esther poses some interesting questions. Why is this ancient novella that does not mention God included in our Bible? It's a book that is a bit like an ancient Rom-Com and there seems to be no justification it being part of the sacred text. On one level, its only justification is to give an explanation for the feast of Purim, which has no other reference in the Biblical text. The problem is, however, that it seems the festival of Purim started before the book was written and there is no archaeological or historical evidence for the events that are described in this book (plus the numerous errors contained within it). So, why is this book considered "scripture"?

The book of Esther was written at a time of relevant calm in the international affairs of the people of Israel. This meant that in Jewish society there could be a major focus on what it meant to live faithfully as a Jew. The Soferim, from the Hebrew word for Scribe, became almost obsessive about the finer details of the Torah. This was down to working out which was the middle word, and which was the middle character of the Law. The Torah had been standardised and now was being studied in its minutest detail.

That was the situation for the Jewish people who had returned to their homeland. For those who continued to live in the diaspora, there was the related question of how to still be a faithful Jew away from the homeland. This is one important question the book of Esther addresses.

The Jewish Woman's archive tells us:

Women were, in the world of the Persian diaspora as in many other cultures, essentially powerless and marginalized members of society. Even if they belonged to the dominant culture, they could not simply reach out and grasp power, as a man could; whatever power they could obtain was earned through the manipulation of the public holders of power, men. In this sense the Jew living in a foreign land could identify with the woman: he or she too was essentially powerless and marginalized, and power could be obtained only through one's wits and talents. But, as the actions of Esther demonstrate, this can be done. By astutely using her beauty, charm, and political intelligence, and by taking one well-placed risk, Esther saves her people, brings about the downfall of their enemy, and elevates her kinsman to the highest position in the kingdom. Esther becomes the model for the Jew living in diaspora or exile.

However, at the same time, Esther does things that no good Jewish girl should do. The worst of these is marrying a Gentile man. In so many ways, Esther is not the good Jewish girl that we would like to think she is. Even in her preparation to see the King – which could result in her death – Esther is not depicted as praying. Indeed, the lack of reference to God in the book of Esther so disturbed the ancient commentators, that not long after it was written a further author, fortunately writing in Greek, added six chapters to describe the piety of the characters. This is a piety that is missing in the original story. But living faithfully is not necessarily about piety.

And so the question of how to live faithfully in the Gentile world shows that piety is more than prayer or specific acts of worship. It is about the way we live and the risks we take so that our community may have a future. It reminds us that we always have ways to respond to power, even if these may not be the traditional ways in

which power is expressed. Esther is not simply a hero; she stands for vulnerable people, exemplifying the intelligence, resourcefulness, and fidelity that are necessary for dominated people to survive in dangerous times.

What does living faithfully look like in our contemporary context? At Synod I was talking to a Uniting Church school chaplain. She said that social justice is the way that young people today express their spirituality. Like Esther, they use the limited power they have to make life better for the vulnerable in our society and in our environment. The concern of young people for an environment that gives them – and all people – a future in which they can flourish parallels the concern that Esther had for the future of her people.

Until Esther was selected to become Queen, she had very little in the way of power. She was an orphan, a woman, and the descendent of a people taken into exile. In short, she had every reason to not have any power. Even when she was Queen, her power was limited. However, Esther recognised those who had less and used what she did have in the ways that she could.

Power is something that is expressed in many different ways and is also relative to the situation. Most of us in this congregation have a reasonable amount of power. We have the power of being able to make choices about what we buy, most of us have the power of education, some even have the power of connections to the decision-makers of our society. It is important to recognise what power we do have because without that recognition we risk misusing our power to further selfishness rather than God's reign. Take a moment to reflect on the question of what power you have in our society.

The fact that in our society we have a relatively large amount of power also is challenging for our reading of Esther. Our position in society is more like Haman than Esther and so it is easy to get defensive or go into denial. However, for all that Haman is presented as evil and the king as incompetent, there is not a condemnation of having power, merely a question of how we use it.

How do you choose to use your power? Does it change as we find out more about what is destroying the future of the planet? Do you modify your use of power to give the young people of today a chance of a future in which they can flourish? At the start of Sustainable September I finished the reflection by challenging people to commit to one action they could take in the next week or so to work towards a more sustainable future. As we finish this month focused on sustainability, what is one thing you can do to use your power to make a better world for the young people of today so they, and the natural world, can look towards a future in which they can flourish?