

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9.20-22

September 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. Harvest  
Thanksgiving

*The hidden God of Carnival*

Last week the Jewish community around the world celebrated one of its great festivals, known as Yom Kippur or The Day of Atonement. And this morning we turn our attention to a Bible story that is the basis for another Jewish festival, one that is celebrated in the Spring, known as the Feast of Purim and which concerns the story of Queen Esther. It has been said that all the Jewish festivals, with the exception of Yom Kippur, can be summed up in three short sentences: ‘They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!’, and what makes Yom Kippur untypical is that it involves fasting . But certainly Purim fits that description as it is associated with joyful eating and drinking, and how appropriate therefore for us to share a lunch after this service. Having retold this story, ‘let’s eat!’

There is however one big difference with the story of Esther which makes it very unusual. If we were to go back to that short summary of the Jewish festivals we could argue that it misses something out. ‘They tried to kill us. We survived.’ Let’s eat! misses out the role God plays. A more accurate summary would be, ‘They tried to kill us. God acted. We survived – let’s eat! That, for example, is the basic plot of the oldest and most foundational story of Jewish liberation, the story of the Exodus. There the people of Israel had become slaves in Egypt, as you will recall. And God heard their cries and acted, summoning Moses into leadership, sending plagues when Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites, and eventually parting the sea so that they could pass through. Here God is at work, liberating the people of God.

What is noticeable about the Book of Esther, however, is that God is nowhere mentioned. Here it really is a case of ‘They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat’, for there is no trace at all of God acting. God seems to have been written out of the story. In fact Esther for that very reason had a hard time getting into the Bible at all. It seems to be a completely secular book. No-one prays in it. The closest we get to anything religious is the mention of a fast to which the Jews are called when they are threatened with extermination. But nowhere is God said to act or to intervene. Interestingly, there are other versions of the book in circulation, including a Greek version, where God is very much an actor in the story. It’s as if God’s absence has been an

embarrassment that has called for the rewriting of the book. But here, in the original, God does not feature.

So why? Why no God? Why does the story of Jewish deliverance on this occasion omit the great liberator of Jewish tradition, the God of Moses, the God of the exodus? Here, after all, the Jewish people are in exile, far from home and separated from their roots and suddenly there is this decree to destroy them – and where is God? It doesn't seem to occur to anyone to give God a name-check.

Well, I would like to suggest to you that maybe God is not quite so absent in this story as it appears. Indeed God may be hidden and silent and less than obvious, but maybe this story invites us to learn to discern traces of God in other ways. And the first thing I want us to notice is the extraordinary courage and defiance of Mordecai and Esther. The whole story revolves around them and their actions. Take Mordecai. He is one great subversive. He has the wisdom and foresight to recognise that if he can get a Jewish queen on the throne of Persia then the excesses of Persian power can be curbed. He knows that if he can smuggle her into a position of power then who knows how the cause of the Jews might be advanced? And then there is his refusal to bow and scrape before Haman, his refusal to be humbled and humiliated by an oppressor. Here is Mordecai subtly manoeuvring and scheming in order to undermine the absolute power of the empire of Persia. And as we watch him are we not in fact seeing the same God, the God of the exodus, the liberating God of Moses at work once again – only this time operating through human agency? Here God does not intervene through plagues and through the parting of seas but through the defiant resolution of this man who is prepared to take responsibility and act.

So too with Esther. She too is courageous, working the system to serve her own ends and those of her people. She knows that her scheme to manipulate the king into a position where he can over-rule Haman and save the Jews is fraught with danger. She knows that as queen she does not have open access to the king and that even approaching him could lead to her execution. Yet in chapter 4 verse 16, when Esther resolves to act, these are her memorable words to Mordecai: 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf... After that I will go to the king though it is against the law: if I perish, I perish.' Like Mordecai, there is Esther the defiant, prepared to put her own life at risk to save her people. And here she stands at the head of a great

tradition of saints and martyrs who have been prepared to take responsibility at risk to their own lives. And is not God present here? In fact do not Esther and Mordecai in this story take the part played by God in other stories? They act for God to save the people. And is this not where the hidden God is to be found? Not acting over our heads, not intervening from above, but at work in the courage and determination of those who are prepared to do what they can.

Indeed is this not the mark of a genuine, authentic, mature, secular faith? Our faith in the living God all too easily invites us to a childish and immature dependence that deprives human beings of their God-given power and responsibility. And God will have none of it. God is indeed present here – defying, subverting the forces of evil and oppression. But you have to look at Esther and Moredecai to glimpse him.

Following on from that, however, there is another way of viewing God's presence in this narrative. You see, the feast of Purim is also termed the carnival of Purim, and quite rightly so, given the significance of the term 'carnival'. Christianity has its own history of carnival as a celebration that takes place just before the season of Lent, but its origins pre-date the Christian faith, going back at least to Roman times. Basically what happens in carnival is that briefly, for a time, the world is turned upside down. All our accustomed orders and hierarchies and structures are reversed and inverted and turned inside out and people are permitted all kinds of licence not usually extended to them. So, at carnival boys would dress up and parade in bishop's mitres, and fools and jesters were made kings for a day in a burlesque celebration of role-reversal. And what we see here in the book of Esther is a kind of carnival. Everything is reversed and thrown into disarray. Esther the meek woman triumphs over Haman the proud man. Haman dies on the very gallows he has constructed for his enemy Mordecai. Ahasuerus the all-powerful king is overpowered and undone by the wise charm of the queen. And in a not particularly attractive twist at the end of the book, the Jews who are the hunted become the hunters, taking vengeance on those who would destroy them. The world is turned upside down. Everything is inverted.

Now, there are many explanations of carnival and the purpose it serves. Some suggest that it is a kind of release valve for people who are stifled and constrained by the oppressive order of things. It's a kind of blow-out that releases their pent-up frustration.

Whatever the purpose though it has been observed that carnival usually serves to reinforce the status quo. After a period of anarchy the old order re-establishes itself with an even former grip than before. And in this way, while it seems to be liberating it is actually a subtle way of tightening the hold of the establishment. But here in Esther we have a much more subversive version of carnival. The effect here is not to reinforce the grip of the empire. The purpose is not to give an inch of freedom in order to secure a mile of captivity. Here is genuine and lasting undermining of the oppressive powers that be. And here, surely, God is present in this narrative. For here we catch echoes of the God who comes to us in Christ and turns everything upside down – the God who casts down the mighty and exalts those of low degree. This is the God who in Christ welcomes sinners and sits at table with them while the Pharisees stand out side and mutter; this is the God who in Christ places the prostitutes and the outcasts at the head of the queue for the heavenly banquet and sends the squeaky-clean holy people to the back. And such role-reversal is God’s calling card. Wherever you see that happening you catch a glimpse of the divine. And we need to learn to discern God there in the carnival disarray that accompanies the drawing near of God’s Kingdom.

Today is our harvest thanksgiving and in some ways it is appropriate to celebrate the story of Esther on this occasion. You see, Harvest Thanksgiving is in some ways a celebration of order. Nature is ordered and dependable. There is summer and autumn, winter and spring and without such reliability there would be no harvest. We owe it to the constancy of nature that there is seedtime and harvest and today we thank God for such faithfulness. But a God who only upholds order can easily become a tyrant. Such a God can too easily become a bastion of the status quo. Such a God can too easily become a refuge for tyrants and for the Hamans of this world. But there is also the carnival God, the God who shakes the foundations and reverses roles and upturns our priorities, subverting our pecking orders and inverting the hierarchies of our world.

Today, then, we gather in this secular age to celebrate a God who is hidden and who may appear sometimes to have been written out of the world’s story. But we trace this God in the order and regularity of nature that produces the harvest. And we trace this God wherever the oppressive human ordering of life is undone and tables are turned and people find release. And we trace this

God in the responsible actions of human beings who strive to make that happen. Amen.

O gracious, living God,  
another dawn breaks,  
another day awakes,  
and all creation rises to praise you, its Maker.  
And we rise with it,  
adding our voices to the silent chorus of praise that extols you:  
you by whose hand all is made,  
you who ordain the rhythm and rhyme of the seasons,  
Spring and Summer, Autumn and Winter,  
seedtime and harvest.  
And so we come with gladness to worship you,  
echoing the joy of creation;  
but we come too with sorrow.  
For as we bring to you the offerings of the earth  
we know ourselves to be destroyers;  
we know ourselves to be hoarders,  
we know ourselves to be colluders with  
the plundering of nature  
and the unjust distribution of its resources.  
And so we confess our sins and acknowledge our failures...

God, your Word assures us that you loved this world  
so much that you sent you Son to redeem it.  
You assure us of your grace and forgiveness.  
And in that promise we go on in peace, saying together