

Sundays between 25 September and 1 October, Ordinary 26 Year B

Continuous

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

The little book of Esther is quite remarkable. It is set in Susa, one of the major provincial capitals of the Persian Empire.

Following the downfall of Vashti (she refused to be 'shown off' in public for her beauty), the equally beautiful Esther – a young Jewish woman – has become queen of Persia, wife of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). Mordecai, her cousin, had adopted her as his own daughter after her mother and father died. One of Ahasuerus' most eminent officials, Haman, has developed a plot to incriminate and eliminate the Jews. He has even prepared a gallows on which Mordecai is to be executed.

In contrast with Vashti, Esther arranges a great feast in honour of her husband. She, the great beauty, will be the star of the show, but this will no doubt please Ahasuerus. Seizing her moment, Esther pleads with the king for the liberty of the Jewish population in Susa. The king asks (in essence) 'What's brought this on?' Esther's response is to tell the king of Haman's plot. The king is incensed and orders Haman to be hung on the very gallows that Haman has made ready for Mordecai.

For obvious reasons, this story – history or legend or more likely a mixture of the two – sets Esther on a pedestal in Jewish memory. She is a great heroine, living in the Jewish Diaspora. But she is (and this story is) a model of Jewish survival in the face of Gentile persecution. It is linked with the festival of Purim, but evidence for this is hard to establish. Some believe that Purim is in fact a memorial of the feast Esther herself arranged – which in turn may well have been a Persian celebration.

Ps 124

This Psalm sings of rescue by the divine hand, an appropriate echo of the Esther story.

Related

Num 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

This is a version of the 'murmuring' story that depicts the hungry and fretful Children of Israel during their desert wanderings. The focus here is on Moses' and Yahweh's response. Verses 10-15 suggest extreme displeasure, couched in terms that Moses himself might have used.

God's response – besides being angry – is to urge Moses to convene a council of seventy elders. Once convened they experience something akin to what is described in some Christian circles as 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit': they begin to prophesy. The final section tells the tale of Eldad and Medad, two invitees

who did not attend the convention. Nevertheless they receive the same blessing, causing protests, but Moses will hear none of it. Rather like Paul in his comments to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12) Moses says, in essence: 'the more the merrier'.

Ps 19:7-14

Just two weeks ago the whole of this psalm was set for morning worship. Here the focus is on the second part, which sings of six perfections of God: the law, the testimony, the statutes, the commandment, the fear and the judgements. It is perhaps not appropriate to take these six too literally, as six distinct characteristics; rather, they span the range of God's wise provision for God's people.

The final paragraph tells of the need for humility before God. If we understand so little about God, any attempt on our part to evaluate how well we match God's expectations of us (or God's hopes for us) is almost futile. The phrase in verse 13 - presumptuous sins - hints that we cannot even get the measure of our own shortcomings. We often under-estimate them, failing to take them seriously enough; sometimes, however, we are drawn into taking them too seriously, giving them too much power over us.

Epistle Jas 5: 13-20

Elsewhere James has warned of the careless use of the tongue - the unruly member. Here he takes a positive, constructive line. Use your tongues to pray for one another. In particular, for the well-being of the sick among the fellowship James recommends that the elders (it's not easy to connect this term with anything in modern church practice, but the message is clear: senior members of the church community) should anoint the sick with oil and pray for their healing.

Gospel Mark 9: 38-50

Jesus' disciples report with disapproval what they see as someone trying to muscle-in on Jesus' reputation as a healer. But Jesus takes a very different line. In contrast to James, he seems to be suggesting that his power can be wielded by someone who is not part of a recognized group of his own followers. Indeed, the very experience of seeing healing take place will bring blessing on the healer, spurious or not, as well as on the healed. More puzzling is verse 41, which suggests that the cup of water is a blessing only if given to those who bear the name of Christ.

That phrase - the name of Christ - is probably the key to this passage. Its use as a kind of talisman had become widespread in the early church, and attempts may have been made to regulate its use. The appearance of this paragraph in the gospel may have been intended to warn against the danger of 'turf wars' among groups of disciples, some of whom wanted to claim exclusive rights in the matter.

The passage closes with a developed warning against slovenly or careless practice in the ministry of caring exercised by the church and its representatives. We may wish to argue against being dominated by 'what other people think'. But if they can point to our slovenly or careless practice as a reason for their own errors, then we must accept at least part of the responsibility. This argument is taken up by Paul in his letters to Rome and Corinth, where he deals with sensitive issues about the interface between the Christian community and the surrounding culture(s), especially laxity in sexual relations and the use of meat.