

For almost 2,500 years the book of Esther has been an enigma, a mystery. Jewish characters known only by their Persian names. A farcical comedy king. An irredeemably evil villain. And, most puzzling of all a book of the Bible that doesn't mention God.

Welcome to Esther's world. Over the next four weeks we're going to be looking at this wonderful story, soaking up the plot, getting to know the characters and, I hope, seeing the unmentioned God who stands behind not only Esther's world, but our world as well.

This week we're going to focus on the main character of the story, the heroine, if you like (though, as we'll see, there's quite a lot about her that's not terribly heroic), Esther, after whom the book is named. And we're going to learn five things about Esther's world...

1 Esther's World is Dangerous

Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus if you have an ESV) was one of the mightiest kings the world had ever known. He ruled an empire that stretched from Greece, Egypt and Libya in the West through Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan (show map).

He was immensely powerful. And not in same way that Barak Obama has become powerful – through the votes of the people. Xerxes was an absolute monarch. Everything in the Empire depended only on his word and his whim. If he said “off with your head” – then off came your head. That would be not too bad in a well-balanced and level headed person. But Xerxes was neither well-balanced or level-headed.

As you heard in our first reading, when, after seven days of non-stop drinking, Xerxes ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear in front of all his lascivious, ogling, boozed up mates, and she, understandably, refused. And Xerxes deposed her instantly as Queen.

As you heard in our third reading, when evil Haman (about whom much more in the next two weeks) comes to Xerxes with a plan to exterminate an entire race of people, the Jews, within the empire, he can't even be bothered to find out which people are to be put to death and hands over the lives of

men, women and children without a second thought.

And as you heard in our fourth reading, when Esther's cousin Mordecai urges her to go to Xerxes to try and stop this slaughter, she knows that even to approach the king if you are not one of his seven closest advisors is to invite instant death.

Xerxes is an arbitrary, capricious, quick-tempered man with absolute power of life and death over millions. Getting close to him, and nobody is required to get closer to him than Esther, is not a safe place to be. Esther's world is dangerous.

2 Esther's World is Morally Ambiguous

Esther is a young, and stunningly gorgeous, Jewish girl. Orphaned, we know not how, she was brought up by her older cousin Mordecai who seems to have had some sort of job in the Persian civil service.

When Queen Vashti is deposed, Xerxes is encouraged by his civil servants to appoint a new king using a sort of perverted beauty contest. Here's how it worked...

Officials (presumably those considered to have a good eye for “talent”) scoured the empire looking for hot young women who were then to be brought to the king's palace. We might ask whether the young women had a choice; but the concept of having a choice when the king tells you to do something in a society like that isn't one they would have understood. It's not so much that they were forced – it's just how things were.

These virgin women spent twelve months in the virgin harem being prepared for their encounter with the king. And, every night that he desired fresh meat, the king would order a new virgin to be brought to him. She would be allowed to take whatever she wanted with her – probably an allusion to aphrodisiacs, sex toys or whatever else she thought would tickle the king's fancy – and, after the king had finished with her she would be returned to harem number two which was, to put it bluntly, the home for used goods. There, unless called for again, she would live out the rest of her life in a gilded cage, allowed neither to return home or marry any other man.

The winner of this twisted competition would be, as the author of Esther puts it, the one who won the favour and approval of Xerxes. In other words, since all he got to see of these women was their performance in the bedroom, the winner was the virgin who would give the king the greatest sexual pleasure.

Let's face it this is a sordid, disgusting and depraved idea which was invented by wicked men who probably wanted a king who was giving so much attention to his life between the sheets that he was easily manipulated into doing what they wanted on matters of state and they were free to feather their own nests from the wealth of the empire.

And Esther gets involved. Did she enter the competition willingly seduced by the worldly wealth of the palace and the possibilities of power? Did Mordecai beg her not to join in the perverted sexual games of the court or did he put her name down? Did she get approached and carried off under threat of force to the harem? Lots of commentators on Esther, determined to make her either a villain or a heroine, want to decide what the answers to those questions are. But the book simply doesn't tell us. We don't know about Esther's motivation. We don't know if she hated every minute of life in the Harem or if she was absolutely obsessively captivated by the sensual luxury of the endless spa days and great food. We don't know if she went into the king's bedroom trembling with fear, rigid with disgust or overwhelmed with lust.

We do know that she concealed her Jewish identity. And that cousin Mordecai did the same. Did she do this because she was trying to forget her own heritage and plunge into a flood of pagan sexual freedom? Did she do it because she was simply terrified of discrimination and possible death? Or did she desperately want to tell who she was but refrained only because Mordecai who was her guardian and protector had told her not to? Again we have no idea.

You see the point of what we learn about Esther in these early chapters is not to set her up as a role model for us, either good or bad. We simply don't know enough about what makes her tick to declare her a hero or a villain, a weak or strong woman, even a believer or an unbeliever. All we know is what happened to her.

What we can say though is that she lived in a place where it wasn't easy to do the right thing. There are some things we can say that Esther did that were

definitely contrary to the Old Testament law that she was meant to follow – sleeping with a pagan king she wasn't married to comes pretty high up the list. And some would say that Esther ought to have resisted doing that even to the point of death. Well maybe she should. But, on the other hand, you could put forward a pretty good case that Esther was, effectively, raped – forced to perform sexually under threat of violence. And, if she was, should we condemn her, and all the other women who have suffered sexual violence through history, for not resisting more? Of course not.

We simply don't know enough about Esther to know whether she was a hero or a villain. But we know she lived in a deeply ambiguous and complicated world. A world where it was easy to get it wrong. A world where sometimes there seemed to be no right choices. A world where, unless you know all the facts, it's pretty difficult to make a judgment about the moral actions of others. Esther, in other words, lived in our world.

Now that is not to follow the dead path of moral relativism and say that there are no right and wrong answers to moral questions. It is not to say that we ought to choose, in any given situation, to just do what we want and then hold our hands up and say "hey, ho, life is complicated."

The author of Esther, and indeed all the Bible writers, share with me the conviction that the God of the Bible is a profoundly moral God who is always right and never wrong. And that in every circumstance in human history there are right and wrong, or at least better and worse ways for people to behave.

But I suspect that in a church like ours the biggest danger is not moral relativism – imagining that people can do as they please. Rather it is a lack of moral charity. The feeling that I can look upon someone else's life and make moral judgments about everything they do or do not choose.

Evangelical Christians, sadly, have a disturbing tendency. We rightly see the Bible truth that there is right and wrong in the universe. But we wrongly apply that truth and end up believing that everybody else should always be able to see clearly what the right thing to do is in any situation and that if they do not come to the same conclusion as me they must therefore have done wrong.

Add to that the tendency to either think the best of someone else's motivation all the time (because they are our hero) or the worst of someone else's

motivation (because they are not our hero) and you have a potent recipe for judgmentalism and backstabbing in the church.

Let me give you some examples of the kind of people we are prone to condemn...

- The Christian GP who will sign abortion request forms.
- The person who spends a lot of money on his car.
- The person who never comes to church on Sunday night.
- The Christian who doesn't have quiet time.
- The church member without any non-Christian friends.

Now I do not want to say that there are no right and wrong answers to any, indeed all of, those questions. And I am not saying that because the world is complicated we don't have to think about those things – quite the opposite. Because the world is complicated we have to think about them all the more.

But I am saying that life is full of morally ambiguous situations where Christians may, for better or worse, choose different things. And where we do not have all the information, and especially given that we do not know people's thoughts, one of our great needs is to be generous and charitable when we look at the lives of others in our church.

3 **Esther's world requires courage to be a Christian.**

When Mordecai finds out that King Xerxes has signed a law allowing the extermination of the Jewish people he realises straight away that Esther is uniquely placed to be able to do something about it. So he heads off to see her, dressed in the standard garb of mourning at the time, and manages to send and receive messages via one of the eunuchs.

Esther is initially reluctant to go and see the king to try and sort this out; she clearly fears for her life. But Mordecai points out some home truths to her. If the Jews are all exterminated there is no way, he says, that she is going to escape. But if they are not, and he is confident that they will not be, she will certainly be marked out as a traitor and betrayed to death. If you speak up, Esther, and identify yourself with the Jews, as one of the people of God, you may lose everything. Your royal position, your wealth and comfort, even your very life. But if you do not speak up, Esther, you will certainly lose everything.

Some people suggest that this threatening sounding speech from Mordecai means that Esther doesn't really make a choice and that therefore her decision to stand with God's people, to identify herself and say "I will go the king, and if I perish, I perish" is not a brave one. But I don't think that's right. After all Jesus says more or less exactly the same thing about being a Christian: *"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."*

It's absolutely obvious, Jesus says, that being a Christian is the better choice. If you're a Christian you might lose your life. But you will keep your soul. And if you don't follow Jesus you will undoubtedly lose everything. But does that mean being a Christian is not a courageous choice? No of course not. Because to be clearly a Christian today, just like going to stand before King Xerxes, is to have the bravery to stand up and be counted now rather than hiding away and hoping that the consequences will never happen.

Although it's the ONLY logical thing to do it still took real courage for Esther to identify herself with the people of God. It took genuine guts for her to choose to use her position of influence for good – for true justice and for God's people – rather than for her own comfort and prosperity.

This, then, is the defining moment in Esther's young life – she is almost certainly only about 20 years old. The time when she decides that she is going to be known as one of God's people, the time she chooses to be seen by all around her to be a Christian is absolutely central to all that she will become.

The fact that she does this in true knowledge and understanding of the God she acknowledges is hinted at, though not explicitly stated, by the fact that she goes off to fast for three days before she goes to the king. Mordecai sees that God, in his providence, has brought Esther to where she is, whatever her flaws and faults, for good. And her coming of age as a believer is the moment she starts to acknowledge that and live in the light of it.

I wonder whether that moment has yet to come for quite a lot of us. You might reply to me that your colleagues at work know that you're a Christian so you're off the hook. And I will say to you that that's not what I'm talking about. Because Esther's decision here wasn't simply to admit that she was a Jew – as big a step as that would have been. Rather it was to decide to use all her influence, all her power and all her opportunities to advance the

cause of God and his people rather than to live for her own advancement.

And I suspect that some here, perhaps many, though your colleagues may know you are a Christian (at, probably, no great cost to you), have not yet grasped that God has brought you too to such a place as you are – whichever hospital, school, business, office or partnership you work at – for such a time as this.

Why are you in your workplace? At the school gate you collect your kids from? On your course? In your halls? For the cause of God and his people. To use every ounce of your influence and power to do right not wrong, justice not injustice, to speak not be silent, for Christ and not for you.

What does that look like? Well all sorts of things. It looks like being willing to take the rap when things go wrong on your watch. It means thinking that the point of the engineering charter is to prosper your firm and do better engineering not to drive a faster car. It means the reason you are a student with a share in your Student Union is to live and speak for Jesus there not just to get cheap newspapers and drink in the Liver bar.

It's the only logical way to live. But, just like Esther's world, our world too needs courage to be a Christian.

4 Esther's world points us to Jesus...

Lots of Christians treat the Old Testament, and perhaps especially books like Esther, like biographical morality guides. We look at the villains and preach that we should be the opposite. We look at the heroes and preach that we should be the same.

But there are several reasons why that's not a good idea.

Firstly because, as we've already seen, although often it is obvious whether a particular character is behaving well or badly it's unclear enough of the time that you couldn't be sure that emulating a particular man or woman of the Bible would be a good idea.

Secondly because our world is so difficult and complex that it's not always obvious what Esther, Abraham, Moses, David or Daniel (to name but five) might do in the same situation as we find ourselves in.

But the main reason it's dangerous to see Esther, or any other OT character, primarily as an example, either good or bad, for us, is, as Tim Keller points out, that it's not a burden we are able to bear. If you walk away from this sermon this morning determined to be like Esther why will you have done that? It'll be, I suspect, because I have guilt tripped you into feeling like you have not done well enough so far in your Christian life. And how long do you think that feeling will last? Till after lunch – quite probably. Till Monday morning? Possibly. All week? I doubt it. And even if it does last all week how will you come back to church feeling? Either still guilty because you know you haven't done well enough or proud because you think you've made the grade. And will that be helpful? Of course it won't.

Our world is full of examples isn't it? Full of role-models who we try, and mostly fail, to emulate. But the characters of the Old Testament aren't mostly meant to be examples. They are, as Keller points out, meant to be signposts.

And Esther, just like the others, is a pointer, a signpost, an arrow marker to the Lord Jesus Christ. An unjust law was passed in Susa to exterminate the Jews. But there is a just law in the world that rebels against God have to die. As the White Witch put it in *The Lion, the Witch and the wardrobe* speaking of the fate of Edmund, the little boy who betrayed his friends:

"You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to kill.... And so that human creature is mine. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property... unless I have blood as the Law says all Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water."

In Susa, Esther decided that she would identify with her people. And she went and stood between them and the powerful forces of evil arrayed against them, knowing that it might cost her her life. In Roman occupied Israel, God decided that he would identify with his people and became one of us, born in human flesh, in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. And he went and stood between his people and the just and righteous wrath and anger of God at our sin and rebellion, certain that it would cost him his life.

If you try to be like Esther without knowing that Jesus has already shown all the courage needed to rescue you forever you will be crushed and broken or proud and haughty.

The right way to respond to Esther is to thank God that he has sent his son. A son who did not have to be pushed into a situation of desperation in order to identify with his people but who came because his love for his Father and us was so great that he went willingly to be a sacrifice on a Roman cross. The right way to respond to Esther is to see that relief and deliverance has indeed arisen for everyone from another place; relief and deliverance for everyone who trusts in Christ has arisen from the very throne room of heaven.

If we trust in Jesus then God, infinitely more powerful and infinitely more just than Xerxes, holds out his golden sceptre to us for eternity and declares that we may live. And because Esther is for us, first, a signpost to Jesus who wins rescue for us, she is ALSO an example who we can follow in the security of Christ...

5 ...so we can be like Esther.

Esther went and stood before King Xerxes, in the end, not because she was reckless about her own safety. She went because she was convinced about her own safety. Esther went because she believed Mordecai's words that there would be deliverance for God's people and that meant that, in the end, it is always safe to stand with them.

You and I, too, will identify ourselves with God's people, will fight for justice in the name of Jesus for others and shoulder unjust suffering ourselves not because we are reckless about our safety.

We will be able to do those things consistently not because of the motivation of guilt or the powerful example of a long dead Jewish beauty Queen.

No we will stand up and fight for what is right when we are completely convinced of our own safety. When we are persuaded that salvation has arisen for all of God's people and that therefore standing with God's people, saying "this is who I am and I am not ashamed of it" is the safest place in the universe to be.

Jesus Christ has stood for us on the shore of God's wrath and won salvation. He has ensured that we can live. And so we are liberated to be like Esther. We too are living out our status as royal when we use the positions God has given us, whatever and wherever they are, for the greatest good we can.

In our complicated world we might, from time to time, disagree about what living for God and his people looks like in a specific situation. And we

must be careful not to harshly judge other Christians in such a world.

But let there be no doubt that we are fundamentally called to make clear to all the world who we are and what is right. It is possible that doing this may have a cost attached to it. In fact it is certain that, sooner or later, it will have a cost attached.

But because the one who identifies with us has gone first. Because Jesus Christ has stood in the way of death and taken the hit for us. Because he is our rescuer we can live in the liberty of a life like Esther's, knowing that, in the end, it is always safe to stand with God's people.

What will that mean this week? It might mean standing up for justice for a colleague who is unjustly treated at work because their face doesn't fit. It might mean inviting that person on your course to the CU's Go! Week hall group meals. It might mean using your influence in the health service to have adoption on the agenda as well as terminations even though people will hate you for suggesting it. It might mean taking responsibility where you could get away with passing the buck. It might just mean saying you are a Christian to that friend, course mate or family member who doesn't know.

Whatever it might mean for you this week you can be utterly confident that because Jesus Christ has rescued us from death you can afford to live like Esther and identify yourself with God and his people. In fact, you can't afford not to.

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