

Esther 7:8-8:-11; 9:1-10 “God’s World”
Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

I want you to come on a journey with me this morning. I want you to travel through time and space to the city of Jerusalem, around 300BC. You are a young Jewish person, boy or girl, doesn't matter, perhaps about 14 or 15 years old. You've been learning at school about the Exodus. Reading the book of Exodus. Seeing the astonishing and spectacular events that happened nearly 1,300 years earlier than your own lifetime.

God, seeing the people to whom he had pledged himself through Abraham, suffering in terrible slavery and oppression in Egypt. God raising up a great leader, the mighty man Moses, to demonstrate to Pharaoh that the people of God were not his plaything but would be set free by the mighty hand of the Lord himself.

God sending plagues on the Egyptians – blood, boils, locusts, frogs, darkness and, in the end, death. God leading the people of Abraham across the red sea, miraculously parting the waves so that they could walk over with dry feet and then swilling the waters back in and annihilating the pursuing army of the wicked king. God saving hundreds of thousands of men, women and children by his spectacular intervention in history.

You come home after school. You walk past the foreign soldiers posted all around Jerusalem, as they have been for nearly 300 years now. You see the signs warning of the penalty of death for anyone disobeying the Greek government that is currently running your country.

You walk through the door and you ask your Dad “why God doesn't do something about all this? Why doesn't he intervene spectacularly in history once more to shake the earth and part the seas and defeat the wicked pagan armies?”

What, you wonder, is God doing in the world? Because he certainly doesn't seem to be intervening.

“Hmm,” your Dad says. “Good question son, or daughter. A really good question. Here's a book to read that might help you to think about it.” And he reaches up onto a shelf and takes down the scroll of the book of Esther and gives it to you to read. “Keep asking that question as you read this book.” he says, with a smile.

So you read. You read about the events of 300 years ago. Nearly 1,000 years after the Exodus. You

remember that the Jews were in exile in Persia, where Esther is set, because they had disobeyed all the things they had solemnly sworn to God they would do. You recall that in great grace God had permitted many Jews eventually to return to their homeland under the rule of the Persian empire.

And you read the life story of two Jews in the court of King Xerxes, Emperor of Persia. There's Mordecai, a senior civil servant in the Persian government, and there's his young cousin Esther, who has become Queen of Persia.

And as you read on you are reminded, for, being a good Jewish boy or girl you've read this story before, that the story of Esther revolves around the massive conflict between Esther and Mordecai and the man Haman.

Haman, the Prime Minister, who has what can only be described as an obsessive hatred of the Jews and especially, of Mordecai. He doesn't hate Esther – but then neither she, nor anybody else except Mordecai, know that Esther is Jewish.

To try and quench his hatred Mordecai arranges not only for every Jew in the empire to be killed, by promising the people that it will be perfectly legal and that they can keep all the Jews possessions if they murder them, but also for Mordecai to be pre-emptively impaled on a massive gallows or pole which Haman has had built especially for him.

You read on and see how Haman is one of the Bible's classic examples of a proud person. And since the Bible teaches that pride comes before destruction you know the inevitable destruction that will be visited upon Haman as the wheels come off his plan in spectacular fashion. Sitting, reading through the scroll in the corner of your parents' lounge you see how just as he was planning to ask King Xerxes to execute Mordecai, Xerxes, instead, asks him to promote and honour Mordecai.

And how just as he was planning to have Mordecai killed, Esther revealed Haman's plot to kill the Jews to King Xerxes, who had Haman summarily executed – impaled on the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai.

Then you read the parts of Esther we had read to us this morning – about the reversal of the king's decree for the destruction of the Jews and their

great deliverance on the day that became known as Purim.

You put the scroll down. And your Dad comes back into the room. "So what's the answer?" he says. "Why doesn't God do something about all this? Why has he not rescued us in spectacular fashion like he did for Moses and our ancestors in the time of the Exodus?"

Of course you don't have to be a little Jewish boy or girl in Greek occupied Palestine in 300BC to want to know the answer to that question do you? You simply have to look around our world at the suffering of Christian people, at the vile wickedness and injustice that is perpetrated each and every day on our planet.

You don't need to be in any particular time or culture to ask that question. If you are a person who believes in and loves God and has even an ounce of sensitivity and compassion in you the question will strike you again and again as one of the most important in the world.

Why doesn't God act spectacularly to rescue his people from this mess?

And, as much as there are lots of other things to learn from the book of Esther, that, I think, is fundamentally the question that this book was given to answer for us.

Why doesn't God act spectacularly to rescue his people from this mess?

It's an odd question for me to say lies at the heart of this book. Because, as you'll know if you've read it, God isn't actually mentioned in the book of Esther at all.

But the fact that God isn't mentioned doesn't mean he isn't there. I don't think the author of Esther ever intended us to read this book as just a series of random coincidences that just happened to result in the preservation of the Jews from destruction.

In fact there are a whole pile of hints in the text itself that, God, though hidden, is, nevertheless, very much present throughout this story...

In 4:14 Mordecai promises Esther that if she does not take a stand as a Jewish woman in her people's hour of need relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from "another place"; "the place" being a common Jewish way of speaking of God himself,

using an reference to the place of the temple where God had his presence.

In 3:7 when Haman casts the Pur, the lot, to decide on the best day for the destruction of the Jewish people, it "happens" to land on the eve of Passover, that day when the Jews celebrated their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

No, this book is not presenting a series of fortunate events. It is, instead, showing us the actions in history of the hidden God. And it is answering the question: "why doesn't God intervene spectacularly to rescue us from this mess?" And, as we come to the end of the book, that question is answered as we see God act in two very important ways. What is God doing in the world? Well...

1 The unseen God saves his people by providing a substitute.

One of the great themes in the book of Esther is the idea of reversal. Things get unexpectedly turned around. And the centrepiece of that reversal comes at the point where Haman faces his fate.

Think, for a moment, about what has happened here. King Xerxes has wickedly and foolishly signed a decree, proposed by Haman, that allowed all the Jews of the empire to be murdered. Esther helps Xerxes see that this will, in fact, fundamentally undermine his kingship. If this decree goes ahead either the King will have to protect his own Queen from his law OR he will have to hand Esther over to the mob. And neither of those options are exactly going to enhance his reputation as a wise and just ruler!

When Esther exposes Haman as the original author of this plot the king sees that here is a perfect opportunity to solve the problem.

Haman's approachs Queen Esther in contravention of court rules. That gives Xerxes the ideal excuse to get rid of Haman. Haman gets put up on the gallows.

Although the word we have here is in most of our English translations is "gallows" it is, in the original, just the word for tree or pole. In the ancient world, in all sorts of cultures, being hung on or impaled on or nailed to a tree was the worst sort of death, It was the ultimate despised death. It was the destiny of traitors and the cursed. We know that was true in Jewish culture because the Old Testament law teaches that anyone hung on a tree is cursed.

But we know as well from all sorts of other ancient documents that to be killed in this way was a thing of terrible dishonour and shame in other cultures too.

And what happens in the book of Esther? Haman gets impaled on the tree that was intended for Mordecai. Now we know, of course, that that's poetic justice. It's a kind of James Bond ending to a movie – where the nasty villain is fried by his own laser, blown up by his own bomb or stabbed through the heart by his own plutonium rod.

It is poetic justice. But that's not all it is. Because Haman's death here on Mordecai's tree is also a substitution.

On the orders of the king the planned death of Mordecai is substituted, swapped, for the death of Haman. This story was never going to end without bloodshed and violence. But the hidden God has saved his people by ensuring that a substitute dies instead.

It would not have been lost on the first readers of the book of Esther that this is exactly what they would have celebrated on the day of Passover. On the first Passover God's angel of death went through Egypt, striking down the first born male of every womb – human and animal. And God's people were saved from this terrible fate not because they were nicey, nicey and didn't deserve it but because they killed a substitute. They slaughtered a lamb and pasted its blood on the wood of their door frames.

Then God intervened spectacularly. He told Moses what to do. He wrote a massive and visible sign in history that he was at work preserving his people through the spectacular miracle that they did suffer death die who had substituted a lamb for their sons.

In Mordecai's day God worked behind the scenes. There was no massive miracle – just the lashing out of a drunken pagan king at a servant who had put him in a difficult position.

But let there be no doubt that God orchestrated the death of Haman as a substitute for Mordecai just as he orchestrated the death of the lambs as a substitute for Jewish sons.

400 years or so later there wasn't much appearance of a miracle either as a corrupt court and a weak Roman governor sentenced to death the only totally innocent man in the world.

There wasn't much sign of a miracle as Jesus Christ carried his cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem and was nailed to a tree, hoist up for all the world to look at in shame and ignominy.

But there too God was saving his people by providing a substitute. This time, however, the substitute was neither guilty and deserving of death, like Haman. Nor was he blissfully innocent and uncomprehending like the Passover lambs.

This time the substitute was the king himself.

Xerxes could not reconcile keeping his own law that he had passed which said the Jews had to be killed *and* being faithful to his promises to Queen Esther which said he would protect her. So the king had Haman hanged on the gallows.

The Lord God could not reconcile keeping his own law that he passed that said the guilty, and that means all of us, deserve judgment *and* being faithful to his promises to rescue a people. So he came and suffered himself, hanged on a pole.

The unseen God saves his people by providing a substitute.

That 3rd BC Jewish boy or girl could look back at the story of Mordecai and see that, although it might not have looked as spectacular as the Exodus, God was still active in history saving people by substitution.

This morning, you and I, can look back not just to the story of Mordecai but also to the greater story of Jesus and see that whether God's actions are spectacular or hidden away behind the scenes, he is always active in history.

He has saved his people from sin and death and judgment by providing a substitute for us. Jesus Christ, hanged in our place.

But in the story of Esther it's not just a negative substitution. It's not just that Haman takes Mordecai's place on the gallows. Because Mordecai also takes Haman's place of honour. Mordecai swaps his sackcloth for royal robes. He swaps a sentence of death for a signet ring. He swaps a gallows for a regal horse.

God saves his people in history. Not just by saving them from the consequences of sin. But positively too. By putting us in the place of honour. Jesus doesn't only take our shame; he also gives us his

glory. He makes us his brothers and sisters, inheritors and rulers in the kingdom of God.

The unseen God saves his people by providing a substitute.

2 The unseen God destroys his enemies in a holy war.

Among all the difficulties of the book of Esther perhaps the hardest is not the lack of God's name – after all, as we've seen, his hidden presence is seen throughout the book.

The hardest part of the book, for most modern readers, is the killing.

Even when Haman is destroyed the Jews are still in trouble. The architect of the wicked law that allowed them to be killed was dead. But the law was still in place. And, we're told, the laws of the Persians couldn't be repealed – because that would be tantamount to an admission that the king had made a wrong law. How could a king who believed himself to be perfect make a bad law? So the law cannot be undone.

Instead Mordecai, using the authority that used to be Haman's simply adds another law to the old one. This law, 8:11, allowed the Jews to gather together and protect themselves using lethal force. Although the NIV slightly obscures the fact, the new law also allowed the Jews to kill the families of aggressors and plunder them, just as they themselves would have been plundered.

Mordecai and Esther hoped, I imagine, that the very threat of retaliation would be enough to put people off attacking the Jews and that there would need to be no bloodshed at all.

But, sadly, that's not how it worked out. Despite the law Mordecai enacted some people attacked the Jews and the Jews defended themselves, killing both the perpetrators of violence and their families – 75,000 people died in terrible bloodshed and slaughter.

To our modern ears the whole thing sound barbaric. Why, we wonder, did they not just destroy the attackers but also their families? Couldn't Mordecai have authorised them just to use necessary force but not to kill people unless it was absolutely unavoidable?

Well no doubt he could have done. And, no doubt, that would make this story much more acceptable to our sensibilities than it is at the moment.

But if that was how the story went it would mean we missed out on one of the most important ideas in the Bible.

And that is that God fights a holy war to defeat his enemies.

The idea of holy war is repellent to most of us, perhaps because we associate it so strongly with people flying airliners full of civilians into tall buildings.

But it is not so alien to the world of the Bible. Because God is totally and utterly opposed to wickedness. Here's how commentator Karen Jobes puts it:

“From the beginning of time God's war has been against sin and evil. It is easy to think wrongly of sin and evil as being abstractions apart from people. We seem to want God to destroy sin and evil but leave people alone. However, sin and evil do not exist apart from beings who sin and beings who do evil, whether angelic or human.”

Right through the Bible God calls his people to destroy his enemies, not because his people are good and worthy, but because God in his grace has mercy on them.

In the Old Testament the sign that the war was a holy war, that it was motivated by concern to destroy evil and not for base reasons, was that God's people would not make any profit from the war. They would not take the cattle, homes or cash of the people they conquered. The only things not destroyed were gold and silver – which went straight into the temple of the Lord and not into the hands of the people at all.

That's why it's so important that as the story of Esther unfolds we learn that, although Mordecai's decree allowed the Jews to plunder their enemies, again and again the narrator of Esther tells us that they didn't do that. They did not lay their hands on the plunder. This was a holy war. A war against evil and wickedness, not a war for profit.

What does God do about evil and wickedness in our world? Well throughout the history of Israel he fought holy wars. Against the Sodomites. Against the Egyptians. Against the Canaanites. Against the Philistines. Against the wicked people of Xerxes empire.

Each time that happened the result was the same. Each time a holy war was won God's people experienced a period of peace. Or, as Esther puts it, 9:22, God gave them rest from their enemies.

What does God do about evil and wickedness in the world? Throughout the Old Testament he fought holy wars to give his people rest.

But there was a problem. The rest never lasted. Our young Jewish or girl in the 3rd century BC would have known that. By the time he or she was reading Esther the people of God were being oppressed again by forces of evil and by wicked governments. So what will God do?

Well to fulfil all his purposes there needs to be a different kind of holy war. A war of which the holy wars of the Old Testament are only a tiny taste. A war where the forces of evil and wickedness are utterly overwhelmed and defeated. A war where Satan is defeated. A war and which opens up the possibility of removing evil hearts from men and women who are otherwise all, without exception, destined for judgment and destruction. A war fought on a cosmic scale that casts the devil down and bring new life to people oppressed by their own sin and rebellion and deserving of hell.

A war fought on a Roman cross 2,000 years ago. People often think that the cross is a symbol of how much God loves us. And so it is. But the *reason* that the cross of Christ is a symbol of how much God loves us is that it shows us just how much God hates sin and wickedness. He hates it so much that people who are guilty of sin must die. They must be cut off from him. He cannot, in his holy being, stand sin. Sin, rebelling against God and his laws, is so terrible, so wicked, so awful that it can never just be forgotten. There must be justice. God cannot repeal his law. His decree is that we deserve to die. And die, not just in some earthly battle of swords and blood, but die eternally. Die forever. Be removed from all that is good and just and right into forever darkness. That decree cannot be reversed. Because God is just.

So what will God do? He will issue another decree. A decree that says that all who trust in Jesus Christ can be delivered from destruction.

God's ultimate holy war was fought by his son taking upon himself the wickedness of men, the attacks of the devil and the judgment of God. It was a war that triumphed over man's hatred, defeated the devil's lies and absorbed the wrath of God. At the cross God destroyed his enemies in a holy war.

But not all of them. And not completely. For the cursed death of Jesus as a substitute protects only those who put their trust in him. Jesus has taken the rap for them. For them he has defeated the devil, absorbed the judgment of God and opened up the possibility of a new heart and a new life.

We are all God's enemies. But the victory of Jesus in holy war is enough for any of us. Put your trust in him, believe in him and you will be rescued. Your enmity with God has been destroyed and you can have rest, eternal rest.

Fail to put your trust in Jesus and you remain God's enemy. Destined not simply for some bloody earthly end like the enemies of the Jews in Esther. But for an eternal curse under the just and perfect judgment of God.

As an aside it's worth noting that this victory of Jesus is the reason why there is no holy war of the sort seen in Esther in our world any more.

It's why the Islamists with their concept of *jihad* are profoundly wrong. It's why any Christian who thinks that because we are British or American or from any other nation or group that God must be on our side is mistaken.

Because God's holy war to bring rest for his people from his enemies was decisively fought at the cross. It will be finished at the return of Jesus.

So in the meantime holy war is fought by Christians not with swords or guns or helicopters invading people's countries, or even defending their own. The only holy war is where Christians lovingly persuade and encourage people to come and embrace the grace of Jesus Christ. Christians fight for people, not against them.

What is God doing in our world? Well, even when it seems like God is hidden. Even then God is fighting for his people and destroying his enemies.

He fought for us by sending his Son Jesus as a substitute. Jesus took on sackcloth so we could wear the royal robes. Jesus faced judgment so we could know blessing. Jesus died so we could live.

God, through his son, fought a holy war with the forces of evil. Forces that are strong in each and every human heart. And, astonishingly, at the cross, he made the way for people like me and you not to be destroyed by his judgment but, instead, to be

given new hearts and looked on by God as new people, even as his son took on our sin and shame.

Our world is such a mess isn't it?

Someone we know quite well died on Friday, aged 38, mum of two small children. Fine in the morning. Dead by the afternoon. And that's just one of a million tragedies played out around the globe this week. Violence, rape, divorce, sin, misery and death.

There are probably people being made redundant in your offices. There are probably people struggling with their debts. People stressing with difficult situations at work, at home or at uni.

What, we wonder, is God doing in the world? Because very often it doesn't seem like he's intervening.

This morning I don't want to give you any false comfort. I don't want to pretend the world is better than it is. Because it's not. It's a miserable, sin-filled, cursed planet under the judgment of God.

But that does not mean God isn't doing anything. He is always active. He is always doing good. This is God's World.

What is he doing? Well, through Jesus, the unseen God has saved his people by providing a substitute and has destroyed his enemies in a holy war.

And that, if we will embrace the love and grace of Jesus Christ, our substitute and holy warrior, is the greatest and best news in God's World.

Andrew Evans, December 2008