

Esther 2:19-3:15, 5:9-14

Haman's World

Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Adolf Hitler was obsessed by hands and took great delight that his hands bore a resemblance to those of his hero Frederick the Great.

Saddam Hussain rebuilt Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon with millions of bricks inscribed individually with statements of his greatness.

Chairman Mao refused to bathe and brush his teeth, and had to be sponge-cleaned by his assistants.

Kim Jong Il of North Korea believes (or at least lets it be reported that he believes) that he is the world's greatest living golfer – and claims that he once completed a professional course in 34 under par.

The history books are full of very powerful people who are, frankly, really, really weird. The bizarre behaviours and excesses of many of the world's cruellest and most violent men would be, quite honestly, hilarious, if it weren't for the fact that they are also disturbing because of the other actions of those men.

But it remains true that lots of the world's most apparently evil people are actually quite funny. A fact that isn't lost on the author of the book of Esther.

Last week we spend our time looking at the heroine of this book – Queen Esther as she had become by chapter 4 where we paused.

This week we are going to focus in on the anti-hero, the villain of the story – Haman. And the first thing we have to say is that Haman is a bit of a comedy character. There he is strutting around in his robes, the second most important person in the empire, and he can't even get one little Jewish man, Mordecai, to bow to him. When he builds a gallows to hang Mordecai on he has to make it 75ft high – which is about 65ft higher than it ever needed to be. He loves to tell his wife about being invited to a banquet with the beautiful queen – which probably didn't make her terribly happy!

Haman is a comic character in this story – we're meant to laugh at him. We'll see that even more clearly next week in relation to his downfall.

But the fact that we are meant to laugh at Haman mustn't blind us to the reality that he is, and does, evil. The writer of Esther uses humour not to try and downplay the terror of the things that Haman plans but to highlight his awfulness.

It's one of the things people most often misunderstand about humour. It's not that by making fun of something we are necessarily trying to pretend it doesn't matter or that the wickedness of people is trivial. Often it's quite the opposite. To make a joke of someone can expose the wicked seriousness of their sin. That's why the Bible teaches that God himself laughs at the deeds of the wicked. Not because the deeds of the wicked are trivial in God's sight but because they are both awful and pathetic.

So when we are invited by the author of Esther to laugh at Haman please don't think that is because the author thinks Haman's wickedness doesn't matter. In fact I think it is totally clear from the book that as far as the author is concerned Haman is guilty of the worst sin possible in the world.

Haman hates God. Now of course Haman never says that he hates God. But then neither do most of the people in the history of the world who have hated God!

However there are two reasons in the story of Esther why we can be confident that Haman does hate God.

The first is that he is called Haman the Agagite. Now to most of us, well at least to me when I first read it, that doesn't mean very much. But if, like the first readers of Esther, you knew your Old Testament really well you would know who the Agagites were and what the significance of the name is. Agag was the king of the Amalekites in around 1000BC. Years before that, in around 1,450 BC, the Amalekites had the questionable honour of being the first nation to try and wipe out the Jews from the face of the earth, after their escape from Egypt. And throughout their history the Amalekites people became frequent raiders of Israel and attackers of Jewish people. The Agagites hated God and his people. So much so that to call someone an "Agagite" didn't necessarily mean that they were genetically descended from King Agag. Rather it

meant they were, in their very heart, an enemy of God.

The second reason we can be confident that Haman hates God is that the symptoms of that are clearly visible in Haman's life. And, this morning, perhaps you'll see that they are more present than they ought to be in your life as well. So, as we look at five symptoms of hating God from the life of Haman, I hope that it will teach us to recognise them in other people, so that we aren't naive, to recognise them in ourselves – so we can learn to root them out, and to see how the hatred of God has worked out in the whole of human history.

Five symptoms of hating God. So that we can stop being naive as we see them in other people. So that we can learn to root them out in our own lives.

Symptom 1: Because he hates God Haman takes honour that isn't due to him (3:1-6)

Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, we are told, spent his time sitting at the king's gate. That might sound to us like he was a beggar or signing on for his giro or something. But that's not what it means at all. The king's gate, and if you go to modern day Iran you can, apparently, actually go and see the gate of another of King Xerxes' palaces in Persepolis, was a large area of the palace where people gathered to do the work of the court.

It was the place where people who worked for the king "hung out", waiting to do business. There would probably have been dozens of people milling around at any given time having meetings and sharing gossip. Imagine one of the bars of the Palace of Westminster or the cafeteria of the American Senate building and you're probably not far from the right kind of setting.

Parliaments and royal courts are, of course, places of constant intrigue and plotting. So it's not surprising that it was at the king's gate that Mordecai overheard two of the king's servants plotting to assassinate Xerxes. He passed the sensitive information on to Esther, who passed it to the king and the plot was foiled.

In the presence of King Xerxes, Mordecai's invaluable contribution to national security was recognised and recorded in the official records of the court.

After these events, 3:1, King Xerxes honoured Mordecai the Jew, elevating him for his loyal service.

Oh. That's not what it says is it. How odd. Just where you would expect to find an appropriate reward for the service of Mordecai, and faithfully rewarding servants was a vital part of Persian court life. Instead of that a completely new character, Haman, is introduced and he is honoured. Haman is made prime minister, given a seat higher than that of all the other nobles.

Now we are not told how it is that Haman got this position. But the combination of the fact that we expected Mordecai to get this honour *and* the fact that Mordecai then refuses to bow to Haman points us very strongly towards the fact that in some way Haman stole the honour that Mordecai should have had.

And it seems that it wasn't just Mordecai who had a problem with Haman, even though he was the one who refused to bow to him. Because the king had to command people, v2, to bow to Haman. What kind of a prime minister is it that the king has to command people to show ordinary social courtesy to? Clearly not a very popular one.

Well whatever Haman had done it is quite clear from the response of everybody in this story to Haman that he has come to his position by foul means of some sort. We don't know what they were. And that's a good thing. Because it will stop us narrowing the application of this passage too much.

For one of the signs that you hate God is that you are willing to take honour that isn't due to you.

That's seen most clearly in our world in the attitude of the evil one, Satan himself. He wanted to be worshipped. So much so that he even offered to the Lord Jesus Christ power over all the nations of the world if Jesus would only worship him. He was willing to take the honour that belonged to God alone – because he desired to take God's place at the centre of the universe.

That that great evil of Satan's is repeated in smaller and less spectacular ways in every human heart. That's why when somebody praises us for something that someone else really ought to take the credit for we tend, unless we really think we're going to get caught out, to just bask in the honour even though it's not really due to us.

Left unchecked, of course, we end up in a place not where we take the accidental honours but where we actually scheme and manipulate and devise

plans to ensure that we get all the glory and others get all the blame.

How much of the office politics in your ward, your staff-room, your department, your profit-centre or even your family is caused by people jostling to take honour that isn't really due to them? Quite a lot I'd be prepared to bet.

And talking of betting brings us nicely to the second symptom of God hating in Haman's life.

Symptom 2: Because he hates God Haman puts his trust in "chance" (3:7)

No doubt, being a good Persian, Haman believed in all sorts of powerful spiritual forces and gods. He would not have been an atheist. But the way he lived submitted to nobody.

And one of the ways we can tell that is that he casts lots. You might think at first sight that casting lots is quite a humble thing to do. Putting everything into the hands of the gods and seeing what looks most auspicious. But take a closer peek at Haman's life and you'll see that's not the case at all.

Because Haman doesn't cast lots to see what he ought to do. He doesn't consult whatever gods he believes in for wisdom about the morality of his cause. He simply demands that the gods bless the wicked plan he has already decided on in his heart by showing him on what day he ought to slaughter the Jews.

It's a common sign of rejecting the God of the Bible that we turn to sources of chance, like the *pur* or dice here used by Haman, not to answer questions about what we OUGHT to do – we believe we are our own masters in that sphere – but about when we should do things. We turn to mysticism and hocus pocus to give a spiritual veneer to our own wicked selfishness.

Think, if you can bear it, for a minute about horoscopes. What are they all about? Auspicious timing for you. When would you ever read a horoscope that said "it's not a good time for you to be helping someone else out as you've got loads on your plate at the moment with the alignment of Mars and Jupiter but you should blooming well get out and help some people anyway." It just wouldn't happen would it?

Putting your hope in chance, in fate, is a symptom that you hate God, because what we look to fate for is always all about us.

Symptom 3: Because he hates God Haman deceives the king he claims to serve (3:8-11)

To look at Haman you would have thought, if you didn't know better, that he was a loyal servant of King Xerxes. When he comes to the king he presents himself as serving only the royal interest. 3:8 *"There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's interest to tolerate them."*

Haman makes it sound as if the Jews are a bunch of stirrers who are constantly rebelling against the empire. Haman plays on the king's fears by emphasising the different customs of the Jews; it seems, from his great banquet back in chapter 1, that one of Xerxes great ambitions was unity of the many people groups in his empire.

But let's take a step back a minute. What laws of the king is it that the Jews are disobeying?

Well from all the evidence presented to us do far in the book of Esther there is only one law being disobeyed by one Jew: the law that people should bow to Haman being ignored by Mordecai. Haman doesn't want to say what has really happened. Probably because if he does the king will laugh at him and point out that his plan to exterminate a whole nation because one man won't bow to him is utterly ridiculous.

Now there's no doubt that Xerxes behaves like a terribly wicked king in not finding out who the people whose death warrant he has just signed are and what exactly it is they are supposed to have done. But the main fault lies with Haman. He has deliberately set out to contrive a wicked plan and get it carried out by deceiving the king whose servant and subject he is meant to be. The irony is that Haman has a much lower regard for the king and his laws than Mordecai does – Mordecai who saved the king's life.

One of the features of sin, of hating God, of rebelling against him, is that we end up deceiving those we claim to serve. It's an almost inevitable feature of sin. Because sin is all about self-centredness. It's all about me and my needs being the most important things in the universe. And when that's how we live and think it's inevitable that the impact on our relationships with those who have been given some sort of authority over us

or whom we are meant to serve loyally is that we start thinking of ways to use those relationships for personal gain.

Here's how that kind of reasoning works out in everyday life. Of course none of us would, generally, be crass enough to put it in these terms but these, I suspect, are often the thoughts of our hearts...

So the reason I have a boss in the office is not to do the work they want me to do – but to impress them so that they will use their power to promote me.

The reason I have a wife is not to serve her needs and help her grow as a woman and a Christian but to have free access to sex and/or someone to earn the money for the other half of the mortgage.

The reason I have children is not to give myself so that they can know a loving family and understand the model of Jesus Christ – it is so that I can live out the dreams and ambitions I haven't fulfilled myself through them and get some family tax credit into the bargain.

The reason I have friends is not so that I can have a group of diverse people who are a mutual encouragement to me in my Christian life. They are, instead, statistics, notches on my scale of popularity and advertisements for how amazing I am. And, at the very least, they are there to make me feel better and tell me I'm right.

So many of our lies, so much of our deceitfulness is directed at manipulating people we are meant to be loving and serving to achieve our own selfish ends.

How should we respond to that truth?

Well firstly we shouldn't be naive. We shouldn't be like King Xerxes in this story who merely swallows Haman's story and hands over his authority to do whatever Haman wants. A godly Christian needs to be both as charitable as we can about people and smart enough to recognise that many, including other Christians, will try and manipulate us if only we will allow them to. Or, as Jesus put it, we should be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.

And secondly we should be self aware. We should recognise that self-serving spinning of the truth is just another symptom of the residual hatred of God in our hearts. And we must be determined to root it out. That will be costly. Because it will mean that some things we want to happen don't happen.

But it is infinitely better not to deceive those we are meant to serve; because there is a king who cannot be deceived and knows and will one day judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts.

Symptom 4: Because he hates God Haman destroys God's people who offend his ego (3:12-15)

Remember that this whole project is driven by just one thing – the fact that Mordecai doesn't show Haman the respect that he wants to think he deserves; even though he probably knows that he doesn't really merit it at all.

The result of this slight to Haman's ego? He plans a total slaughter of millions of people, most of whom have never heard of Mordecai or even of Haman. Haman manipulates the citizens of the whole empire to join in his wicked cause, appealing to the basest of motives – cash.

The ordinary people of the empire will be encouraged to do great evil by Haman's permission for them to keep all the profits they can plunder from the homes and businesses of Jews they kill. The leader of the country who is meant to restrain evil is promoting cold-blooded murder by its citizens.

There is something profoundly and tragically fragile about Haman isn't there? This trivial matter has expanded in his mind to be an all consuming passion. He massacres a nation for the sake of a bow.

You see one of the features of hating God is that we get everything totally out of proportion. We scream and shout and storm out of meetings. Or, depending on our temperament, we sulk and withdraw and stop cooperating when we don't get what we want.

Not because what we want is so important. Not because the thing we are proposing will change the world and make it a better place and others are trying to mess that up. No, the reason we overreact to the frustration of things we want is simply because we want them.

When we sin we think we are the centre of the universe. And we find it impossible to live with reminders of our own relative insignificance and powerlessness. So we will do anything at all to overcome those who remind us of our own failing and inadequacies or who we perceive as rivals.

In the case of Haman, and other dictators through history, that has expressed itself in the slaughter of whole people and cities.

In our own lives that self-centredness is seen in the way we quietly sideline from our circle of friends anybody who we find threatening to our popularity or success. It's seen in the way we are tempted to talk up the faults of that colleague who is a rival candidate for either promotion or redundancy. It's seen in the way we feel the need to jump on some people's comments in our housegroup discussion as if they were a representative of heretics-r-us.

Hatred of God expresses itself in a fragile ego that needs to destroy rivals.

Symptom 5: Because he hates God Haman can't ever get satisfaction (5:9-14)

By the middle of chapter 5 you would think that Haman would be happy. He is the Prime Minister of the greatest empire on earth. He has successfully issued orders that every Jewish person, including his arch-rival Mordecai, will be slaughtered in 11 months time. The king has told him he can keep his share of the plunder, and the stunningly beautiful Queen has honoured him with a personal invitation to a banquet.

And Haman is not unaware. He knows he has done well for himself. In fact he goes home and boasts about his wealth, power and many sons. He's not unaware. But he is dissatisfied. It's a striking line. He reviews all his successes and blessings and concludes: *"But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."*

It's ridiculous isn't it? Mordecai is slated for execution. He's yesterday's man. Everything in Haman's life is going just how he wants it to. But, as the Rolling Stones put it, he can't get no satisfaction.

And that's because he hates God.

You see once you have made yourself the centre of the universe. Once you have displaced God from his rightful place as the king to be worshipped and adored and honoured. Once you are in the middle. What can satisfy you then? Only everything.

If you think you're in the middle then nothing is ever going to be sufficient for you. Haman got everything he wanted – and found that it still didn't satisfy him.

So he has this comically ridiculous gallows built – the height of a five storey building – to hang a man who is going to be killed anyway.

And if Haman had succeeded in his plan would he have been happy then? Of course he wouldn't. There would always have been something more. Somebody else who looked at him in a way he didn't like. Who didn't bow low enough.

Haman is just like King Ahab of Israel who had all the privileges of power and wealth – but they weren't enough because he wanted the vineyard of an ordinary man called Naboth, so he murdered Naboth to get what he wanted.

Haman is just like King David of Israel who had every blessing that you could count and who wasn't satisfied because he wanted to have a one night stand with someone else's wife.

Haman is, in fact, just like us whenever we put ourselves in the centre of the world. Because when that happens nothing less than everything can satisfy us. And because we can never have everything we are doomed to lives of frustration and dissatisfaction.

I'm sure that with very little thought you can spot some or all of these symptoms of God-hating in the people around you. The folk you meet every day in your ward, your office, your lecture or at the school gate. Of course in most cases they are not as obvious as they are in Haman's life; he is a comedy villain precisely because the author of Esther has written him up in such a way as to make these faults gross and obvious.

But we know those things are there in people we meet every day. So let's not be naive this morning. Let's recognise God-hating for what it is and not be surprised when people react negatively to the Christian message, to invitations to church and even to us as we try and simply love folk in a Christlike way.

I'm sure that with a little more thought you can spot some of these symptoms of God-hating in your own life. So let's not be complacent this morning. Haman who, as we will see next week, comes to a very nasty end, is a terrible warning about the destructive results of pride and self-obsession. We need to see those things for what they are and not allow them a foothold in our lives.

Which, I guess, leads us to a final question. If these are the symptoms of God-hating, if they are

present in the lives of people I meet and, if only I'm honest enough to admit it, in my own life, what can I do about it?

Well the answer is simple. You see Haman's problem, essentially, was that he wanted the approval of the wrong king.

And the only solution to the awful consequences of God-hating is to embrace the love and grace of a better king, a king who is God, King Jesus. And if you want to know more about that, and about what happens to Haman as a result of his God-hating, well you'll have to come back next week.

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