Westlake Church Lausanne

The King who Makes Beautiful

Esther 2:1-18

So we're looking at the Book of Esther, and when this written 2500 years ago, the Jewish people were facing a new challenge. After 70 years of exile in Babylon, they had been allowed to return to Judea. But some chose not to, and they became what we call the *diaspora*, Jewish people scattered throughout the nations. And they faced the struggle of how to stay faithful to God and their Jewish roots, without a temple, without priests, away from God's presence in Jerusalem, and in a polytheistic, pluralistic and pagan society – where the vast majority of people just didn't think like them.

And that's why this book is relevant for us: how do you retain a strong and vibrant faith when it seems no-one else thinks like you? How do you live a life centred on truth, and that truth affect the way you live – when truth and morality seem so passé? Well, it's into just that context that Esther was written.

Esther 2:1-18

What the World Looks For

Verse 1, 'After these things…' – after what things? Well, in chapter 1 we saw King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes), king over the vast Persian empire, get drunk, and demand his wife, Queen Vashti, come and show off her beauty in front of his men. But she refused, and as punishment was banished from the king's presence.

But time has passed. In fact, v16 tells us this was now 'the seventh year of his reign' – so four years have passed since chapter 1. And during that time we know from history that Ahasuerus has invaded Greece, and that that invasion ended in disaster and humiliating defeat for Ahasuerus.

And now, v1 tells us 'the anger of King Ahasuerus [against Vashti] had abated' and 'he remembered Vashti.' He's nostalgic for the old days, and misses her. But he's also banished her. So his advisors, v2, 'The king's young men', come up with a suggestion, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king." Ok, so here are *young* men giving advice about beautiful women and sex with beautiful women – and funnily enough, their advice was not, 'Ahasuerus, you were drunk and you only have yourself to blame, you need to repent, and stop abusing alcohol and your wife.' They say, 'hey cheer up Ahasuerus – let's find some other young women for you to abuse.' The tragedy is that sometimes people will confirm you, and console you in your sin, when what we need is a friend who loves us enough to confront us.

And listen to their plan, v3: 'Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem' and verse 4, 'And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' Now what do you think of this? Is this just a beauty contest? 'Hey your majesty, let's run *Miss Persia*, and you get to sleep with all the contestants and pick and keep the winner.' If it was, that would be bad enough. But this is worse. This is sex trafficking, isn't it, and we should read this and be outraged.

I mean, think of what's going on here. Young girls are taken from their families and forced to have their first sexual experience with a middle-aged man who holds all the power in the relationship. And he takes them, uses them, and discards them. And the vast majority will end up as concubines – held in the harem, never to see the king again after their one night, unless he asks for them; living a life of totally pointless luxury, prisoners of his pleasure. And do you see the irony of this after how chapter one ended? There the officials want to uphold traditional family values – here they are taking girls and making them sex objects.

Now life could be hard for the average person in Persia, and maybe some girls saw the chance of entering the harem as a way out of poverty, and they went willingly, but whilst the writer gives us no moral commentary, you're left thinking – this is an appalling way to treat people. This is power being used in ways that harm.

But what are the entry requirements for selection? Verse 3, 'Beautiful young virgins.' So they had to be young, and virgins, and beautiful. And once they were selected, v3, 'Let cosmetics be given them'. And we're told they are put through a year-long program of beauty treatments before their one night with the king.

So, no mention of character, or intelligence, or wisdom, or social grace, or family. None of those matter to the king. She's just got to be beautiful, and young, and a virgin. It's all about external appearance isn't it? External beauty.

Aren't you glad you don't live in a world like that? A world that puts all the emphasis on your appearance and your body and your sex appeal? But that's the tragedy, isn't it – because this is just like any 21st century reality TV show. It's like the world our girls are growing up in. It's the world each of us lives every day in – where it's the external that matters. It's how you look in others' eyes. And the world has got to love you. Ahasuerus –the power of culture - has got to find you attractive. And you've either got to be beautiful like these women, or you've got to be powerful like Ahasuerus. And you've got to have the perfect body, or the right clothes, or the successful career. And it's soul-destroying, because when you're always feeling like you're being paraded and judged, it's no wonder people talk of an epidemic of mental health issues among the young.

So, if that's what the world looks for, can you find solace or refuge in religion? Well, think about it: are religions any better? Because generally religion tells you that you've got to make yourself beautiful for God if you're to stand any chance of him choosing you. You've got to make yourself *morally* attractive; you've got to go through the beautifying treatments of various religious practices, or good works. You've got to get the externals right, and try and make yourself a beautiful person if you're to win Mr. or Miss. Heaven.

So, whether it's the surrounding culture, or religion, we all live under the eyes of Ahasuerus. So what do you do with that?

The Pressure to Conform

And it's in the midst of this event that we meet our two central characters. Verse 5, 'Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai.' Verse 7, 'He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther.' So here are two Jewish people living in Susa, 1500km away from Jerusalem. So what are they doing there? Well, the writer tells us in v6 that Mordecai's family 'had been *carried away* from Jerusalem among the captives *carried away* with Jeconiah king of Judah, who Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had *carried away*.' Carried away, carried away, carried away. So they're are exiles, living in a foreign land where they are a minority, and vulnerable.

But given that 50 years ago they had been allowed to return, why are they still there?

And the answer is that they have clearly decided to stay. So think about that. The exile was judgement from God – it was an enforced absence from God's presence in Jerusalem. And here are people who have chosen to stay like that – to carry on living in exile, who are seemingly ok with this absence from God.

And that is one of the reasons why God never gets mentioned in this book. Because where is God when you're living in a pluralistic, polytheistic world, whether that's 5th century BC or 21st century AD? And when you're surrounded by such a culture, and when so much weight is put on the external, and how you look in the eyes of others, and when culture is sex-saturated, and God seems absent, what effect can that have on you?

Firstly, your response to sin or injustice or unrighteousness can become numbed.

Look at Mordecai. The writer tells us v5 that he was 'a Jew… the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite.' So he's Jewish – in fact, given that he's from the tribe of Benjamin and the clan of Kish, he's a descendant of King Saul –which becomes important later in the story. Ok, so he's a Jew, named *Mordecai*. Does anything strike you about that? You see his name comes from the Persian name, *Marduka,* which means '*worshipper of Marduk'* the Babylonian god. Does he also have a Jewish name? Well, if he does, the writer doesn't tell us. And given he gives us Esther's Jewish name, that's probably deliberate. It's his way of saying, this is how well integrated, or secularised, he and his family are. They've named their son after one of the Persian gods.

But then look how Mordecai responds to the rounding up of the young women. We're told in v7 that 'Mordecai took [Esther] as his own daughter' that he'd done the wonderful thing of adopting her when she was orphaned. So when the next

thing you read in v8 is, 'So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered…' you're expecting to hear, 'so Mordecai hid Esther, or Mordecai barred the door, and armed himself to fight, or Mordecai got on the nearest camel train for Jerusalem.' I mean, think, if this was you and your daughter – you'd do something, wouldn't you? This is a pagan king rounding up women to use and discard. You wouldn't do nothing. But it seems that is exactly what Mordecai did – nothing. And from the earliest Jewish commentators people have questioned how could he stand by and allow his adopted daughter to be taken like this? He should have risked his life to save her from this.

But it's not as if he doesn't care for her, is it? Verse 11 tells us that once she is taken 'Every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.' So it's not that he doesn't care – it's that he doesn't act. And when you're submerged in a culture you can begin to become numb to its sin – to what is wrong with it. And you stop challenging it, you stop seeing how it's at variance with the culture of God's kingdom. You stop seeing things as injustice and unrighteousness and think, that's just the way things are. And you cease to see the land you're living in as foreign, instead it becomes home.

Secondly, you don't just fail to critique the surrounding culture, you adopt it. And in v7 we're introduced to Esther, 'He [Mordecai] was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther.' So *she* does have two names – Hadassah her Jewish one, and Esther her Persian one – from the name *Ishtar* – the Persian goddess of love and war. And those two names are symbolic of the struggle she – and all of us face – which world, which culture, will define her?

When many of our Chinese students come here to study, they take on a western name – because now they're bridging two cultures, they're moving between two different worlds. And Esther's the same: as a young woman she's moving between the Persian and Jewish worlds, and which one will she identify with? And for you and I, which culture will define us? Will Esther finally go for one, or the other, or will she try and have a foot in both worlds, or will she find a way to integrate the two? Is there a way, as Jesus said, to be in the world, but not of the world?

But notice the difference between Daniel and Esther. You see, throughout the book of Daniel, Daniel was referred to as 'Daniel [his Jewish name], who was also called Belteshazzar'. So it was his Jewish identity that defined him. But in the rest of the book, Esther isn't called 'Hadassah, who was also called Esther', she's just Esther. And that's probably deliberate by the author; he's subtly critiquing those who have become too comfortable in exile, and who risk being absorbed into the surrounding culture. And whilst Mordecai and Esther play their part in saving God's people, their conformity to the surrounding culture is itself a risk to God's people.

But did you notice that the only other thing we're told about Esther is her beauty. Verse 7, 'The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at.' And it's as if this is what defines her. So Esther is being defined in exactly the same way that the surrounding culture defined people. And v8 tells us that 'Esther also was taken into the king's palace.' And she also underwent her 12 months of beauty treatments. And it seems as if she threw herself into those preparations, until her time came and, v16, 'Esther was taken to the king.' And v17 tells us that she ends up winning the king's heart: 'the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins.'

But how does she do it? Does the Lord miraculously turn his heart to her? Is he so impressed with her godly character and witty conversation that he falls for her? Well, we're not told, are we, but the truth is probably much more modern. Apparently she did whatever it took to please this pagan king in bed. And so Esther loses her virginity to a gentile pagan, a man to whom she is not married.

Now, if this was one of your daughters, would you be saying, 'way you go gal! You won Miss Persia!'? Or would you be horrified? You see, from what you read here, does it look like Esther tried to resist? Did she loathe what was happening to her and fight with every ounce of her strength? The writer doesn't tell us, does he, but it seems not.

And throughout we're told how she gained the favour of the harem officials like Hegai, and did as they suggested. So it seems that rather than protest and fight, she was compliant. Now was that because Esther wanted nothing more than to be queen – that maybe this was her dream come true? That maybe Esther so wants the throne that she is willing to betray her heritage, and play the party girl, without even a tremor of conscience or a whiff of resistance. I mean, when opportunity comes knocking you don't want to let your conscience, or old fashioned morality, get in the way, do you?

Now, is that being too hard on Esther? I mean think about it, this girl's an orphan, she's already vulnerable. And how could she possibly have resisted? She's probably only 16 or something. How's she supposed to resist a man like Ahasuerus?

And yet, the reason this is happening is that another woman did say 'no' to the king. And in Daniel we saw young men prepared to be burnt alive, or eaten by lions, rather than compromise. And Joseph, the patriarch, was a vulnerable young male slave, in a foreign land, when he refused to compromise sexually, and he spent years in prison as a result. Could Esther not have resisted as they did? Or did she compromise here because she and Mordecai were already compromised – because she was already conformed to the surrounding culture.

So whilst in Daniel we have clear-cut heroes, in Esther things are much less clear. And it seems that Esther has so adopted a Persian life that she is indistinguishable from it. And that's the challenge for us, isn't it? Because she has been so shaped by her culture that she conforms to the culture, probably without even knowing it. And she, and we compromise whenever we're unwilling to face the consequences of doing the right thing.

And that's the complexity of life in exile, isn't it? What should you let pass, or bend to, or sacrifice, to secure that promotion? When does wisdom become compromise? When does being prudent become unfaithfulness? When does engagement with culture, or society, drift into being absorbed by it?

But the third way we experience pressure to conform is to keep quiet about your faith. Verse 10: 'Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.' So at Mordecai's command, she keeps her Jewish faith and identity secret.

Now why would you do that? Is Mordecai concerned about anti-Semitism in the king's palace and he wants to protect Esther? Or is he concerned about anti-Semitism in the palace and he doesn't want that to ruin her chances? But what kind of a motive is that?

I mean, think about our young Swiss guys who have to do military service. That environment can be hard for them as Christians. But what would you think if I told them – 'Keep your Christian faith secret – don't tell anyone about it'? Or think about your work-place, or your kids at school or when they go away to Uni, would you advise them not to advertise their faith, and if so why?

Now if those are straightforward – what about Christians in North Korea, or what about some of our young adults who come to Christ but they come from families, or countries that forbid or imprison or even kill converts – should they tell?

So is Esther right not to tell? Well, again, the author doesn't tell us. But he leaves it hanging there: are they willing to stay quiet about their heritage because they don't want to risk this shot at the throne? And that's the temptation we all face isn't it? When those around us see life and the world so differently, you stay quiet about your faith to win their favour.

So is there an alternative to becoming numb to injustice and unrighteousness? Is there an alternative to being conformed to the surrounding culture or silent about your faith? Well, the author drops several hints that there is.

The King who Makes Beautiful

Firstly, in v9 we're told that Esther won the 'favour' of Hegai, and in v17 we're told that 'she won grace *and favour'* in the sight of the king. And the word the

writer uses there is *hesed*, which elsewhere in the Bible is used of God's never ending, steadfast love for his people. So even here, even in the harem and all that symbolises, there is this whisper of God's never-failing faithfulness to Esther.

Secondly, in v15, the writer says, 'When the turn came for Esther *the daughter of Abihail*…' So right at the moment she's about to enter the king's bedroom, he links her to her family, to her Jewish roots, to the covenant people of God. That there is a better identity to be had in God's family, than just physical beauty.

Thirdly, if you know the story, (and if you don't, this is a spoiler alert!), the fact that Esther does become queen puts her in a position of influence at the very moment that the Jewish people are threatened. But how does she get there? Through a string of seemingly unlikely events and coincidences: a king gets drunk, a queen is dismissed, there's a round up of beautiful girls, and she wins the favour of crucial individuals. And in v6 we're told three times that the people of Israel were 'carried away' into exile – and that was God's doing. And then in v8, we're told, 'Esther also was taken.' And subtly the author draws this parallel between Nebuchadnezzar carrying the people off into exile, and Ahasuerus carrying Esther off, with the implication that God is in this as well. That in all the mess of this pagan culture, in all the compromise and conformity of God's people – just when God seems totally absent, he's at work.

You see, if we're to avoid becoming numb, or being conformed, or hiding our faith, we need a better identity than what people think of us and how they view us, don't we? We need an identity that makes us fearless, but humble. An identity that makes us bold but not proud, one that makes us gentle and loving but self-assured. And only Christ can give you that.

And here we see moral ambiguity and compromise. But Jesus never compromised. He is the only one who has unfailingly lived *in* the world, but not *of* the world. And here we see Ahasuerus robbing others of their freedom, to abuse their beauty. But Jesus gave up his freedom, and at his trial and crucifixion his beauty was marred beyond human recognition, and he did it to make us beautiful, to wash us clean of our sin and compromise, to give us beauty in place of ashes. And the picture the Bible uses of Jesus' love for you is of a bridegroom who loves and cherishes his bride. Ahasuerus abuses beauty. Religion says you have to beautify yourself, but Jesus dies and gives himself to make you beautiful. And when you know that it's Christ who makes you beautiful, when you know it's him who says, 'I accept you, I love you', then what the world thinks carries much less weight.

And Jesus is the better friend who is willing to confront us – to tell us when our choices are wrong. But even when we do fail, his steadfast, *hesed* love, is stronger than our failure, and it meets us in the harem of our bad decisions, and he transforms even those for our good. Because whilst Esther receives grace and

favour from Ahasuerus, we receive it from a much better king. The king who makes beautiful.