Westlake Church Lausanne

God of Turnarounds
Esther 7-8

Nearly all of us love a good underdog story, don't we? There's something wonderful about a story of how, against all the odds, someone who no-one else would have said stood any chance, triumphs against a much stronger opponent or hopeless circumstances.

Well, one reason why the book of Esther is so captivating is that it goes one better. It's not so much the story of an underdog triumphing, but of an incredible turnaround, of a totally unexpected reversal of fate, of evil being brought down and of good winning the day.

But what I want us to see this morning is that the story of Esther points to an even greater turnaround in history. A turnaround that you and I can be a part of, and when you find yourself in that story it can give your life purpose.

Read 6:13-8:2

The God of Turnarounds
Look at chapter 6:13: 'And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him.' And that *everything* was that Haman had gone to the king to ask him to have Mordecai the Jew publically humiliated and executed. But instead, he had ended up having to honour Mordecai publically with the kind of honour for which he, Haman, craved.

And look how his wife and friends respond, v13 "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him." Now, if you've had a bad day at the office, you'd want to hear something a bit more encouraging than that wouldn't you? At least you'd want someone to sympathise with you. But Zeresh and co, they're response is, 'Haman, you're stuffed.' And the reason? Because Mordecai is Jewish.

And by that Zeresh doesn't mean that he's the Middle Eastern version of an Irish man, that he's got a bit of Irish luck about him. No. She understands that there is a power at work behind the scenes, that is far greater than any power that Haman can muster. And if Mordecai is Jewish, that hidden power is going to be working on his behalf, to protect him and deliver him. So yet again, in a book that never mentions God, we get this hint, even through Zeresh, that God's at work, unseen, for his covenant people. And if Haman has gone to war against that God's people, then Haman's fall has only just begun.

And as that conversation is just beginning, v14, 'While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast.' Don't you hate it when you get hurried by others? When you're not given enough time? But why do we hate it? It's because we're not in control, isn't it, because we feel out of control, carried along by events outside our control. And here is Haman, who thought he had everything sorted, but control is slipping out of his fingers. And yet, none of us can control our own destinies, can we? And those moments when life

feels out of control remind us that control over our lives doesn't lie in our hands, but in the hands of another.

And so the king and Haman come to Esther's second feast. And for the third time, the King asks Esther what it is that she wants, what she would risk her life for to come before him uninvited. But look how he asks her: v2: 'What is your wish Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request?' So he uses two words, *wish* and *request* to refer to one and the same thing – the thing that Esther wants from him. So wish = request = what Esther wants.

And look how she replies: v3, "If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted for my wish, and my people for my request."

So can you see the position she's come to? Wish = request = the same thing. Esther's life = my people's lives = the same thing. So Esther's life and that of her people are one and the same to her. Their danger is her danger; their safety is her safety; their destiny is her destiny. And as she confronts evil, she has identified with them, and she puts herself under the same sentence of death that they are under.

It's a foretaste of the gospel, isn't it? As Jesus comes, and confronts evil, and identifies with us, and takes on our sentence of death, and our danger becomes his danger, and our destiny his destiny, so that just as here, he might turn it around.

But the way Esther does it is very clever. In v4 she quotes directly from Haman's edict, "we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated" but she does it without pointing the finger at the king, who signed the edict off, so she keeps his defences down. And listen to the king's response, which, apparently, in Hebrew is very staccato and sounds like a machine gun firing: v5, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?' And Esther answers, v6: Who is he? "A foe and enemy!" Where is he? "This wicked Haman."

And now Haman is exposed and alone, and the writer tells us he's terrified. And so this powerful man, who thought he could use his power to destroy the people of God, is discovering that there really is a power greater than he, and that his turnaround for the worse accelerates.

And the king is furious and storms out to the palace garden. What do you think's going through his mind? He's in a corner, isn't he? He's got to choose between his top official, and his queen. But how can he punish a man for a plot that he himself approved? How can he save his queen from a death sentence that he himself signed? And how can he do any of that without losing face?

Meanwhile, back in the palace, v7, 'Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther.' So now, both Esther and Haman are begging for their lives. And Haman falls upon the couch where Esther's reclining. The problem is that according to Persian harem protocol, he should have left the room when the king left. But if he had done

so, it would have looked like he was trying to escape, wouldn't it? So he's in a hole. But to fall upon the couch was about as shocking a thing as he could do, because even in the king's presence, he should have kept 7 steps away from Esther. And in that culture to be seen to make a move on the king's wife, or even a concubine, was to make a move on the throne.

So this is about as bad as it could be. But do you also see the irony? You see, Haman wanted, above everything else, for Mordecai the Jew to fall at his feet. But now here is Haman the Agagite, Haman the anti-semite, falling at the feet of a young Jewish woman. Our idols, those things we think will give us what we want in life, have this habit of turning and destroying us, don't they.

And at just that moment, at just the wrong moment if you're Haman; at just the right if you're Esther, or a member of his covenant people, the king returns, and sees what's happening – and misreads the situation. Haman is pleading for his life and the king thinks he's assaulting his wife. And the king's anger goes into orbit. But this is the king who was happy to parade his previous wife as a sex object before hundreds of his soldiers. So how much is his anger to do with protecting Esther's honour, or his own?

And this is all very convenient for the king, isn't it, because now he can dissociate himself from Haman on a charge of attempted rape. And so when Harbona, one of the King's eunuchs tells the king that Haman has built those massive gallows to hang Mordecai on – the man who the king has just rewarded for saving his life, it's the final nail in Haman's coffin. Because whose side is Haman on if he's wanting to kill the man who saved the king?

And so it is Haman pleading for his life that finally costs him his life.[1] And the man who would kill Mordecai upon a massive gallows, is himself hung on those same gallows.

But as you watch Haman being led away to his death, as you see how the tables have turned 180 degrees on him, what do you feel for him? Do you feel pity? Should Esther have interceded to the king on his behalf? Should she have said, 'no, your majesty, you've read this wrong, he wasn't trying to assault me'? Should she have been as concerned for his safety, and his life, as she was for hers and her people's? After all, the reason Haman didn't know she was Jewish was because she had kept her identity secret. So is this when we see something of the night about Esther's character, or is this when she exhibits her greatest strength of character?

Well, the way the writer tells the story, there is no implication that we are supposed to feel any pity for him. Rather the implication is that this is the moment for which Esther has been raised up: to destroy the ringleader of God's enemies – the Agagites.

[1] Firth 107.

And there is a terrible justice in Haman dying the death he had so craved for another man.

So, instead of pity, should you feel pleasure at Haman's fall? Well, isn't the problem that we see so much of ourselves in him? The desire for honour, the desire to be someone, the desire to be at the centre, the desire to be in control, and the fear when we see control slipping away from us. And when you watch Haman, or a 21st century Haman look-alike in free fall, it shouldn't be a gloating sense of satisfaction we feel, but a deep humility: because it's only by God's grace that we're not where they are.

And yet, we all feel this deep desire to see justice done and wrong to be made right, don't we, and it's right to feel satisfaction when that happens. But that inner desire for justice points us to something greater. It leaves us longing for a day when all wrongs will be put right and ultimate justice will be done. And so Haman's downfall, the turnaround he experiences, is just a foretaste of the day when the Bible tells us that evil will be finally vanquished.

But if Haman's turnaround is a foretaste of a greater turnaround, so too is that of Esther and Mordecai. And the king gives Haman's estate to Esther, and the king's signet ring to Mordecai. So all the stuff of which Haman boasted: his wealth and his position, now comes to Mordecai and Esther. And Mordecai, so nearly hung on Haman's gallows, is instead ushered into the king's presence, where Haman once stood, and is given the king's ring, that Haman once wore, and is invested with all the power and authority Haman once held.

And their turnaround is a foretaste of the turnaround the Jewish people are about to experience. But it's also a foretaste of the turnaround all of us can experience as we put our trust in Jesus, and identify with him, and experience life instead of death, and honour in place of shame, and acceptance by God in place of rejection.

But once you've experienced that gospel turnaround in your own life, and once you know a far greater turnaround is coming, when evil will be vanquished, it gives you a purpose to live for. You see, Mordecai gets promoted, and Esther gets riches, and you might think, well, that's it then. Everything's fine: wealth and success, what more could they want? Except for them it's not it, is it?

Read Esther 8:3-6:

Passion for a Cause

Now if Haman's plot has been exposed and Haman's been dealt with, why does Esther need to plead for her people again? Isn't it all done and dusted? Well, now the king's honour has been avenged, it seems there's nothing to worry about for him, is there? The king's already moved on.

But Esther hasn't, and she pleads with the king again to avert Haman's plan for the destruction of her people. And there are some causes, causes of justice and

righteousness, the cause of the advance of the kingdom of God, which we should commit ourselves to for the long haul, even when others move on, even when they cease to be popular. And like William Wilberforce, and the campaign for the abolition of slavery, sometimes it can require a lifetime of involvement, and multiple visits to the king, until the argument and the cause is won.

But that refusal to move on, that endurance in the cause that's right, can do something to your character. I mean look at Esther here. What do you think of the emotion she displays? She falls at the king's feet; she weeps; she pleads. It's not very dignified, is it? Verse 6, "How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" *How can I bear?* This cause has got under her skin. It has seeped into her being. This cause has become her cause. She *feels* this. I wonder, do you feel the cause of Christ and the gospel like that? Or the cause for the unborn, or the trafficked, or the refugee?

In one of his speeches in the House of Commons, William Wilberforce said that, having witnessed the horrors of the slave trade, 'let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.' And God has done something in the heart of Esther, the party girl, hasn't he? She will not rest until the king has guaranteed the survival of all her people.

And when you know that God is the God of Turnarounds; when you've experienced that turnaround of grace in your own life; when you know the greatest turnaround is coming, that evil will one day be vanquished, and the people of God will be rewarded – then the cause of God in the world takes you by the heart, and it begins to change you. And you won't see position or possessions as the chief end of your life; but rather the glory of God and the good and the salvation of others.

But there's a danger, isn't there. And that is that when you become passionate for a cause, you can see those who stand in your way as the enemy. And you can begin to wish they were taken out of the way rather than stand in the way.

Read Esther 8:7-17

Vengeance and the Cross
So the king makes clear to Esther that it's not as simple as him revoking the previous order: v7, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman…" what more do you expect me to do? You sort this out.

And so Mordecai writes a new edict, v11, 'Saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.'

Now, what do you think of God's people organising themselves for a decree that allowed them to slaughter women and children? Well, firstly, this edict is written to

counteract Haman's edict, and so Mordecai repeats almost word for word Haman's decree, but instead of ordering the Jews' destruction it gives them permission to protect themselves. Verse 11, it says the Jews were 'to gather and defend their lives.' So this is no lone-ranger, vigilante-esque action. This was to be the community coming together in defence, not attack. And that defence was against 'any armed force… that might attack them.'

And yet… even in an age when we've seen children used as weapons of war, and women used as suicide bombers, an order that includes women and children as legitimate targets does not sit easily, does it? And some commentators suggest that it's precisely that kind of disquiet that you're supposed to feel. That in writing this edict, the Jewish people in Persia are in danger of behaving just like everyone else in Persia. And whilst the law of Moses explicitly protects the vulnerable, even in war, they are in danger of being indistinguishable from those around them, rather than being a distinctive community. After all, Israel ended up in exile in the first place was that they had lived no differently from the nations around them.

So even though this edict ensures the deliverance of God's people, it also represents the challenge we all face, doesn't it? How do you to stand up for truth and the purposes of God at a time when those things have enemies? And how can you fight for what's right, but not fight as the world fights? How can you face opposition, without seeing those who oppose you as enemies and wanting to get your own back?

Well, consider what the cross of Jesus has to say to our desire to take our opponents out, or get our own back – that desire for vengeance. At the cross Jesus stepped into our place – and he took the wrath of God, he took the vengeance of God, that we deserve, and instead, it's not vengeance that's poured out on us, but God's love and grace and forgiveness and patience, as we are treated way better that we could ever deserve to be treated. And at the cross Jesus dies for his enemies.

And yet, the cross never says that sin doesn't matter. The cross doesn't sweep sin, or injustice under the carpet. In the crucified body of his Son, God holds sin up for the awful thing it is. So the cross never cheapens or condones sin, instead it tells you that sin has been, or will be paid for. If the person repents and turns to Christ, Christ has fully paid the price for their sin. Vengeance has already been had in the body of the Son of God. So you don't need to get your own back. But if the person does not repent, they will face that sentence themselves. But that sentence is for God to carry out. As Paul says in Romans 12, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink… do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' (Romans 12:19-21).

And the last few verses of chapter 8 give us an idea of what should mark us rather than vengeance. Verse 16, 'The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour.' Why? Why are they so happy?

Because they're experiencing the joy of salvation, the joy of those who were dead but now live, who were lost but are now found. And it's *that* joy – the joy of knowing the goodness of God and salvation in Jesus, the joy of the turnaround, the joy of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, that tells a story that no amount of arguing can beat. And it's infectious, v17, 'And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.'

So in the book that never mentions God, the evidence that God is with his covenant people was recognisable, not just to his people, but to others. And this story began with Esther and Mordecai trying to hide their Jewish identity, but as they risk everything, and identify with God and his people, and realise that they are where they are for a purpose, for God's glory and other's good, others want to share that identity.

So let's be those who immerse ourselves in the good news of what Jesus has done for us, that in Jesus God has turned our lives around, that we are where we are for a purpose, and let joy soak into our hearts, and then let it shine.