Westlake Church Lausanne

Losing the Palace
Esther 4:1-17

So the book of Esther tells the story of a young Jewish woman who becomes Queen of Persia. And by chapter 4, Esther's been married to the King for 5 years. And as we've seen as we've gone along, she's caught between the pagan world of the Persian court and her Jewish world, and her identity is under tension – which of those two worlds, her Jewish heritage, or her pagan present is going to define her? And because the author deliberately makes no mention of God in the book, that struggle is played out in a world where God is strangely absent.

And that's why this book is so enduringly relevant for us. We too live in a culture, a society from which God seems increasingly absent. And we too have to grapple with which world will define us.

Esther 4

Verse 1: 'When Mordecai learned all that had been done.' And a man called Haman the Agagite, second only to the king, has taken issue with Mordecai's refusal to bow to him. But he doesn't want to take his anger out on Mordecai alone, instead he persuades the king to issue a decree that in 11 months time all Jews everywhere, throughout the empire, be slaughtered.

My girls use that expression, 'well that escalated quickly!' And it must have seemed that way to Mordecai, as his personal dispute with Haman boils over and puts the entire Jewish people at risk.

And look how Mordecai responds: v1, 'Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.' So chapter 3 ended with the king and Haman sitting down to drink, celebrating this edict – but Mordecai is distraught. And he dresses and behaves as a man grief stricken, a man already bereaved – because that is how doomed he and the Jews are. They're as good as dead.

But did you notice how public this all is? Mordecai goes out into the city, into the public square, and for the very first time he willingly, publically identifies with the Jewish people. Up until now he's told Esther to keep her faith and heritage quiet, and until this episode with Haman he's kept his own faith quiet. But now, the man who has been so reticent to identify with God or his people, goes public.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to wake us up to our spiritual condition doesn't it? Sometimes it takes a crisis-like episode to help us see what really matters in life, to re-order our priorities. And so sometimes crises are God's gracious gifts to us, the wake up call we need. So when they come – don't waste them.

But Mordecai is not alone in his grief: v3, 'And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting.' What's missing there? I mean,

you read, 'with fasting, weeping, lamenting' and you're expecting to read 'and prayer', aren't you? Because these are Jewish people, these are the people of God, and they're in dire trouble, so they fast, and weep and lament… and pray, surely? In fact, the writer is probably quoting one of the Old Testament prophets, Joel 2:12. And under the threat of impending destruction, just like here, the Lord calls on the people to return to him, with fasting, weeping and lamenting. So Jewish readers would hear here the echo of Joel's words, and they'd be expecting the writer to say, 'and they prayed, and they turned back to God, and they called out to God to save them.' Except he doesn't say that.

So, why no mention of prayer? Have they become so secularised, have they got so used to living in this pagan, pluralistic culture, that they do all the external stuff, the fasting, weeping and lamenting, they go through the motions, but they don't pray? Or is this the author's warning that this is what can happen if you become too comfortable in exile? Because you know from your own life that this can happen, can't it? You live in a world where the supernatural is ridiculed, and you begin to imbibe that; you drift from God, and your relationship with him grows stale, and when trouble comes we do everything we should do, we plan, we act, we try to fix, we do everything…. except pray. And then we wonder why God can seem absent.

But I suspect they did pray, and this is another example of the author deliberately hiding God in the story. And the reason I suspect they're praying is that if our comfort can cause us to forget and drift from God, trouble has this ability to drive us back to him.

And the reason these people are in trouble is that annihilation is certain unless a deliverer arises. Which is why Mordecai does what he does.

The Call of the Palace

So the Jewish people, empire wide, are under threat of death, and in the palace, right in the epicentre of Persian power, is Esther, the queen – who just happens to be Jewish. Except no-one other than Mordecai knows that. And so through an intermediary, Mordecai sends Esther a copy of the death warrant, v8, 'that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favour and plead with him on behalf of her people.'

So notice how he describes the Jewish people – they're 'her people.' These are *your* people, Esther, you're one of us, you're Jewish, and the Jewish people are in grave danger. So Mordecai has changed hasn't he? Gone is the caution, now he's asking her, commanding her to identify with her faith and heritage, to identify with the people of God.

But secondly, look what he asks her to do: to beg the king's favour, and plead with the king on behalf of her people. So he doesn't just want her to *identify* with

her people, but to intercede for them, to speak up for them, to mediate for them with the king. He wants her to use her position, her influence, her power, her social and political capital on behalf of those who now have no power. And that's the call of the palace, isn't it? Or it should be. That those in the palace, in positions of influence, or power, or wealth use what they have for those who have no power.

But just ask yourself, who is in the palace? Who has influence, or social capital, or wealth, or power today? And you might answer, 'presidents, prime ministers, certain celebrities'. Sure, but what about closer to home? You see, by any standard, whether it's in the university, or your work-place, or in our neighbourhoods and homes, you and I are phenomenally privileged, aren't we? To live where we live, to earn what we earn. So it's not just Esther who's in the palace, we are.

But why is she there? Because that's the last question Mordecai puts to her in v14: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Now do you see the implication of the way he puts that? *'you have come'*, or *'you have been brought'* to the kingdom. In other words, without mentioning his name, Mordecai is telling Esther, 'it's God who's brought you to this place, and he's brought you here for a reason, and it's not so you can live the party life – it's for this moment, it's so you can intercede for your people. This whole palace thing is God's doing'. But surely, Esther's there because she's beautiful, isn't she? That's why the king chose her. But who gave her that beauty? Did she make herself be born beautiful? Did she have control over her genes so things worked out the way they did for her? And the timing in the vacancy in the queen department, did she have anything to do with that? No, all the key steps were outside her control.

And think about that for you and me. So little of the success we enjoy in life is down to us, isn't it? Now, sure you've studied and worked hard, but your IQ, your intellectual abilities, the family you were born in to, those breaks, those openings that let you get a foot in the door, that senior colleague who gave you the break you needed, that phone call you received, that advert you saw, you had no say or control over them, did you? In 1 Cor 4:7 Paul says, 'what do you have that you did not receive?' In other words, like Esther, you're in the position you're in, you're living in the palace, because God has brought you to this place. And like Mordecai, that should leave you with a question: '*Why* has God brought me to this place, at such a time as this? Why am I so privileged? Why in Switzerland at this time? Why in my position in this moment?'

And just like Esther, it's not so we can line our pockets, or enjoy the good life, or buff our reputation and CVs, and gold plate our pensions, whilst outside the

palace walls the powerless suffer and evil advances. Just like Esther he has given us what we have, he's positioned us where we are, so that we use the capital, the influence, the power we have for those who have no power: for the poor, or the unborn, or the elderly, or the trafficked, or the refugee; he gives us what we have so that we can give ourselves for his purposes and his people in the day when it seems dark powers are advancing.

But if living in the palace comes with a call, it also comes at a risk.

The Danger of the Palace
Verse 2, 'He [Mordecai] went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.' And as we saw last week, the king's gate was the administrative centre of the palace – this was where justice was handed down, and business was done. And Herodotus, the Greek historian, says that the needy would come to the gate weeping and asking the king for mercy. But that's as far as they could go. They could come to the entrance, but they could not *enter*: you can't actually come into the palace compound, weeping and wearing sackcloth. You see, there's a limit to the king's empathy, isn't there. I mean, when you're living the good life, when you're having a party, you don't want to be disturbed by the sorrow and the suffering of the world, do you. You don't want the trouble of others to disturb your comfort – not when you live in the palace.

This week I read a review of a new book, written by a woman whose grandparents had been enthusiastic supporters of Hitler in Nazi Germany. And she told the story of how her mother, as a young child, had looked out of the window as Jewish neighbours were rounded up in the street below to be marched off to the concentration camps, and how her grandmother had told her, 'look away'. But that's the danger of the palace, isn't it? Outside are the powerless, outside are those whose lives are being destroyed by evil, but you're in the palace – so look away. Don't let those in sackcloth and ashes disturb you.

But the second danger is in v4, 'When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth.' Now, does Esther know why Mordecai is behaving like this? And the answer is 'no'. It's only after he refuses that she makes any effort to find out what's upsetting him. So why does she respond like this? Why send the clothes but not ask any questions? Well, when you're the queen, you don't want your close relative looking like a beggar at the gate, do you? It's just not seemly. And Esther is living in an honour-shame culture, and she sure doesn't want the shame of a badly dressed, over-emotional relative.

And the danger of the palace is that you get caught up in your own world, a world that's taken up with image, and appearance, and what others think of you.

And whilst Esther's culture was one of honour-shame, Andy Crouch, the American writer, describes our own as one of fame-shame, where we dread losing face, and where appearance is everything.

But in the face of what Mordecai knows, in the face of the threat to God's people, Esther sending out better clothes looks all so superficial, doesn't it? But that's the problem. As God tells the prophet Samuel, 'man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.' But the comfort and the image consciousness of the palace, the fame-shame of our culture, will constantly push you to major on the external, to want Mordecai looking good, rather than asking why Mordecai weeps.

But the third danger of the palace is that you fear losing it. You see, Mordecai asks Esther to go and intercede with the king, but Esther replies that everyone knows that you can't just go into the king whenever you want, and if you do, you die. Your one chance is if he extends the golden sceptre to you, v11, 'But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.'

So Esther's response is, "You can't ask me to risk myself! You can't ask me to put myself in danger!" No matter that hundreds of thousands are in a similar predicament. And yet, she's not exaggerating, is she? This really could mean death for Esther… especially if she's out of favour with the king, and she's clearly worried that's the case. We saw last week that there's already been a second collection of virgins since she was chosen. And now she hasn't been called for 30 days, and the king hasn't been sleeping alone those thirty days, has he? So five years into marriage and it seems the king has cooled on her. And maybe it would be expedient for him to do away with her. After all, her predecessor, Vashti, was deposed for resisting the king, so what chance would she stand?

So Esther's position is already vulnerable, and she fears for what she might lose – the palace, her position, her life. And maybe you know what that feels like. I mean, are there times when you've shied away from doing what you knew to be right, for fear of what you might lose as a result? Or maybe you feel the insecurity of your own position: 'I can't speak out for integrity, or justice, or truth here; or, I can't identify with God and his people in this context – think what I might lose. I can't side with that colleague who's being mistreated – that would put my own position at risk. Or, that friend being excluded from the group, if I reach out to them, how will I look, what will that cost me?'

But of course, if you don't speak up, if you don't act, if you don't take your stand against evil, you've already lost, haven't you?

Willing to Lose the Palace

Look what Mordecai says in response to Esther's refusal to go: v13, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other

Jews." So Esther faces a choice doesn't she? Will she continue living as a pagan in the palace, or will she identify with God's people? In other words, Esther, it's time to decide who you really are. But which ever she decides, even if she makes the wrong choice – there will be a cost to pay. Verse 14, "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish."

In other words, Esther, if you don't stand up now, rescue will come from another place, God will save us somehow, but Esther you will perish. Now, is Mordecai threatening her? Is he suggesting that if she doesn't go to the king, he will let it be known that she's Jewish – and so she shouldn't think she'll survive? Or is this a threat of divine judgement? Well, we're not told, but maybe Esther was wondering the same. And yet, up until now, despite all his faults, Mordecai has only shown concern for Esther, so what does he mean?

Well, in her commentary on Esther, Karen Jobes says, 'Esther's life *may* be in jeopardy if she goes to the king uninvited, but her doom is *certain* if she does not.'[1] That if she goes to the king she *risks* losing everything, but if she tries to hold on to what she has she *will* lose everything. You see, there comes a time when you have to be prepared to lose the palace – to lose your position, or your status, or your reputation, if you're to do what's right. You have to be willing to embrace shame and lose fame. But if in that moment you don't, then you *will* lose everything, because you lose your integrity, you lose your freedom, because you become a slave to whatever it is you're now choosing to live for.

And so, as one writer puts it, Esther finds herself in a 'crucible of crisis'.[2] And it's this crisis of identity: who will she identify with? It's the same choice we all face. Will she identify as a pagan, and in the process lose everything, or will she risk losing everything and identify as a member of God's people? Is her life for herself alone, or is she where she is, and who she is, for the good and the salvation of others?

And her decision? Verse 16, "I *will* go to the king… and if I perish, I perish." And that's not resigned fatalism, that's commitment. She's going to risk her safety and her comfort for the people of God and the purposes of God.

Where can you and I find the courage to do the same? Where can you get an identity and a security that enables you to risk the palace, and face down fear, rather than become a slave to comfort and safety and position and prestige? Where can you find an identity and security that will give you the backbone, the moral courage, to do the right thing, and not look away, but serve God's people and God's purposes, even if it means embracing shame? How can you live in the

[1] Jobes, 134
[2] Gregory, 83.

palace, and use the power of the palace for the powerless, whilst not being held captive by the palace?

Well, where does Esther find that courage? It's not by looking inside herself, is it? Verse 16, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf… I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king." Hold a fast *on my behalf*. 'Mordecai, get everyone to pray for me, because I need God.' So the party girl, the girl for whom image and comfort has seemingly meant everything, the girl whose first instinct was self-preservation, realises that she needs help from outside of herself; that she cannot do this on her own; that her life lies in the hands of Another.

And that's where you'll get the identity and security you need to risk losing the palace, because God is a God who gave up the palace for you.

You see, Jesus was in the greatest palace; the Son of God was in the place of greatest beauty, and greatest security; and he didn't need to be troubled by our suffering, by the edict of death that we're under. But he chose to identify with us. And he didn't just *risk* losing everything, he *did* lose everything. He didn't say, *if* I perish, I perish, he took the cup in the garden knowing he *would* perish.

And he gave up everything, he put himself under our sentence of death, so that he might enter the greatest throne room, and approach the one true king, and plead there, and mediate there, on our behalf. And because of Jesus, the king of Heaven and Earth extends to us the golden sceptre – 'you can come, you are welcome, you can approach me!'

And when you know God's love for you in Christ, when you find your identity in what he says and thinks about you and not what others say and think; when you know you're a member of his people, that God is your Father, that Christ is your brother, that he gave up the palace for you, you'll risk the palace for others and for him. And when you do, it will free you to act.

Because did you notice the effect this decision to go has on Esther? Up until now, Esther has been entirely passive hasn't she? She's done whatever Mordecai or the officials in the harem, or the king have asked of her. She's been totally compliant, bending and conforming to the culture around her.

But once she decides to risk it all, she becomes a different woman: it energises her, and she becomes much less passive. And she begins to organise and she tells Mordecai what he can do to help her. And as the story progresses it's Esther, not Mordecai, who plans and executes the strategy to bring about Haman's downfall. But it's only after she's prepared to die to the palace, it's only after she's willing to say goodbye to being Queen, that Esther really starts acting like a queen. In fact, of the fourteen times Esther is called Queen Esther in this book, thirteen of

them come after her decision to risk it. And Esther the beauty Queen fades into the background, and Esther the real Queen takes the stage.

You see, the world will tell you that to find yourself, you've got to look inside yourself and *be* your self, and be true to *yourself*. But Jesus says that if you want to find yourself you have to lose yourself, that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it does die – it bears much fruit.

And as we'll see, deliverance from this edict of death will come, not by God performing some incredible, supernatural miracle, but by him taking a young woman, who has made some dubious decisions in her life, who has thrown herself into the party lifestyle, and who now has a chequered sexual history, and he uses her, because she discovers an identity and a security in him and his people, and is willing to die to herself.

And there's the hope for you and me isn't it? Because our past is strewn with bad decisions, and moral compromises, and we've wanted to hold on to the palace. But when your identity is rooted in Christ's love and life for you, and you're willing to risk the palace for him, you'll see the harvest that comes when the grain of wheat falls into the ground.