

From Deadly Deliverance to Making Peace

*A sermon on Esther 7.1-6,9,10; 9.20-22; Psalm 124; James 5.13-20 & Mark 9.38-50
by Harvey Howlett, 26 September 2021*

From Psalm 124

Our help is in the name of the Lord
Who made Heaven and Earth

Over the last few days there have been a lot of ministers on facebook and twitter moaning about today's readings and asking if anyone has any idea what to say. The joy of following the lectionary is there are actually days when that is exactly what happens and you can't avoid being challenged by difficult words and troublesome stories. Scripture isn't easy.

But I have to say it has been all the more daunting for me knowing that I was joining you today as your guest - because I don't know you - and although I have known Nathan for many years now, I have only visited South Yarra once in my life and even then I was with the Anglicans in Hawksburn at the other end of the street.

But I feel like I know a little of this community because I have heard Nathan speak about the community. Indeed as we went online in 2020 it is your example of how to do church by ZOOM which I chose to share with my students training for ministry in the Church of England in London and in Canterbury here in the UK.

So it is a real joy for me to be joining you - but that does not make speaking about these readings any easier.

I began by citing the psalm – in our lectionary the psalm is understood as a response to the old testament reading. So I'm going to begin with the reading from Esther.

The Book of Esther is very peculiar. It is famously included in pub and TV quizzes because it is the only book of the bible that does not mention God.

In addition biblical scholars tell us that it was written many years after the events it seemingly described. Actually, the first words of the book are the same as those in the book of Joshua and that of Ruth - 'Now it came to pass' a common Hebrew form of words which might be most closely understood as the English storytelling phrase 'Once upon a time...'. This is a story - it has goodies and baddies. A misguided king, a corrupt villain of an adviser, a beautiful orphan Queen, an honourable Father figure and of course all the twists and turns you would expect to real in a folk tale.

The story ends up celebrating the escape from slaughter of the Jewish people across the whole of the empire of the Medes and the Persians . And this delivery from death is still celebrated today in the Jewish festival of Purim with rejoicing and giving of gifts and a duty (on the men at least) to drink quite a lot of alcohol.

In the extracts we have just heard - Esther pleads to the King and is listened to – the evil villain is found out and put to death.

But it is not actually a very nice story. The good beautiful Queen may have stood up and risked her life to save her people, but then it is not only the villain of the piece who is pursued and killed, but all his family and tribe across the whole empire. We are told 75,000 people are killed.

It does not take very much to see awful parallels in our own where the victor then pursues and kills their opponents – indeed some of the recent events in Afghanistan might be seen in exactly that way.

But the desire to ‘get our own back’ is not just found in the extremes of war, but is found in all of humanity from the children’s play ground to the workplace, the sportsfield and beyond.

But if the story telling of Esther leads us sharply not to rejoicing over release from our enemies but directly to the problems of the world and human response of revenge and retribution which so continues to plague the ways we think and act. The Gospel reading takes us to a different dark place.

Jesus is teaching his disciples. He has just been revealed to Peter and John in the encounter on the mountain top which we call the transfiguration and he is now travelling with his disciples and beginning to explain what is to happen to the son of man.

The disciples are reported to have been arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest amongst them and in the household in which they are staying Jesus has lifted up a child into his arms and continues to teach them.

So it is in that context, with children around, that we hear the words of Jesus

If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

And then the hard stuff continues

If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off
If your foot causes you to stumble cut it off
If your eye causes you to stumble tear it out

Now I want to make it very clear that Jesus is not actually saying you should do this. It a piece of rhetoric. It's a deliberate overstatement to make a point. I think I need to state that because the English language makes the text hard to hear.

Worse still a small piece of historical translation means that we hear these words as being about judgement and the life to come - ‘better to enter life maimed than have two hands and go to hell’

Mark, of all the Gospel writers, is concerned with establishing the Kingdom of God – for Mark that Kingdom is a very present reality and it is in the person of Jesus that the reality is made know to us. And indeed through Jesus that we are all being called to take part.

So why when we read this story does it seem to be about something else ‘ if you don’t want to thrown into hell’ do these things.

It’s taken me a very long time to cope with these passages of scripture. Part of the problem comes with the translation - the use of an anglo-saxon word ‘hell’ and a mediaeval understanding of the way the world works. And too often the temptation in the Church to condemn people - to take on ourselves the judgement that is God’s alone and to cast people we find different into ‘hell’.

The text actually refers to the Vale of Hinnom, which is a real place – a valley west and south-west of Jerusalem. It was the place where, if you read the prophet Jeremiah, some of the kings of Judah made sacrificial burnt offerings of their own children. This is a place which became a byword as a cursed place of evil and wickedness. It becomes used in the religious teaching of Jesus’ day as a way of referring to evil and the consequences of evil.

And we are, of course, not then helped in understanding this by the literature which has shaped our view. This year marks the 700th anniversary of Dante and his detailed description in his great allegorical poem of the journey through the circles of hell has shaped generations of writers and painters, film-makers and indeed theologians. Abandon hope all who enter here, has become the stuff of fiction and Hollywood - but also, and very sadly within the church, the stuff of condemnation and cruelty.

So what is Jesus actually saying

Again this is rhetoric, it's an exaggerated figure of speech to make a point to the disciples.

And it is being done by Jesus not to make people fearful of a place of wickedness to which you could end up, but rather to encourage you to follow him in proclaiming the good news. As the Gospel of John puts it ‘to live life in all its fullness’,

Mark describes it at the end of today’s Gospel as ‘to keep salt in ourselves’ so that we can be salt for the world.

The job of bringing in the Kingdom is not about making people fearful of the consequences but about drawing people into relationship with God, as best as they can be and without putting stumbling blocks in the way of them finding their way to God.

It is no little surprise that the final words of these rhetorical passages are - and be at peace with one another.

Suddenly the whole exchange becomes revealed, not as some gothic nightmare, but as exaggeration to tell off the disciples for the arguing amongst themselves . Don't you realise that your squabbling is turning people away from the truth you are here to proclaim – be at peace.

Being at peace is, of course, no easy matter.

The call we have to be reconciled with each other. To forgive one another and to seek that forgiveness is not at all easy.

In our worship we do this formally in prayers of confession and in declarations of God's forgiveness. But it remains truly a struggle with which we all live.

The Philippine Anglican scholar Thomas Madella has written of the prayers of confession in a service as bringing the whole of our lives into focus before God.

We can't now go shopping without engaging in questions of justice - and certainly the shared heritage of England and Australia asks serious questions for us about the distribution of wealth and the use of resources, the treatment of formerly enslaved peoples or of indigenous communities and our role today in continuing economic in-balance. What T-shirt I buy and where the cotton comes from is as much about water rights and the treatment of working peoples, about climate change and the protection of the planet, and is as much a matter for my confession and for my prayer.

Indeed, as the effect of the pandemic continues in lockdowns and restrictions - we have to ask about the questions of justice in vaccine distribution

And as we look to the effects of climate change - the impact of rising sea levels particularly and immediately on small island nations in the pacific

But that is the call of justice which is also there in Jesus call to live the kingdom - the call which commands us not to put a stumbling block in the way of the little ones.

You are probably now wondering if I can make this any more difficult. Why has Nathan invited this sombre preacher??

So with all of that in mind I want to turn to the reading from James.

Over the past few weeks we have been working our way through the Letter of James in the Lectionary. I have not listened to all the recent sermons you have had, but I know that several of those who have preached have spoken about this. Today the reading brings that journey through the letter of James to an end.

The letter of James has often been seen as problematic itself. Some have argued that it should not really be in Scripture at all. But here it is, describing in its careful way rules and thoughts for how church should be. It is a genuine letter about church organisation and behaviour , about holding the faith in joy and to the bringing in of the kingdom in all that we do.

It has quite a down to earth practical tone and deals with the reality of church life, of deference and squabbling.

As the letter draws to a close it calls its readers to prayer. To laying on of hands and anointing the sick – to praying with and for each other.

Jesus's rhetoric with his disciples in our Gospel was reminding them of the call to peace with each other. James echoes this in his injunction to the church - to seek out the good and pray with and for each other in faith and in failing, so that all may come into the fullness of life .

I began with the verse from today's psalm

Our help is in the name of the Lord
Who made Heaven and Earth

The psalm takes us back to Esther and to rejoicing at our deliverance in the face of adversity. But unlike the story of Esther we rejoice in the name of Lord, not at the death of our adversary in some continuing argument of retribution and injustice, but because in our revelation of God in Jesus we see a call to live life for each other, to pray for each other, to hold the good of each other before our own.

In doing so we may just begin to truly glimpse the Kingdom of God as it breaks into our world and to understand

That our help is truly in the name of Lord
Who made heaven and earth.