

Did you hear the one about the Sex-goddess who fought Anti-Semitism?

A sermon on the book of Esther and Mark 9:38-50 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 September 2024

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Message

The book of Esther is like a joke that has aged badly, enabling us to see how righteous anger at anti-semitism can become its horrifying mirror image.

Sermon

I don't know if you've tried this, but one of the things you can do on YouTube is find clips from old comedy shows that you maybe watched in your younger days, and it is quite fun to see which ones still hold up as seriously funny, and which ones make you cringe because they have aged really really badly. Monty Python, Happy Days, Dave Allen, the Two Ronnies, the Goon Show, and Benny Hill were all playing when I was a kid, and while some of them are still a hoot, some of them are just awful.

There are jokes that only work if the audience shares the unquestioned prejudices of the comedian, and so when the audience grows up and no longer finds sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and colonialism funny, those jokes don't land any more. They evoke awkwardness or even horror instead.

The biblical book of Esther is an ancient sitcom, and when I read it again this past week, I was feeling that awkwardness and horror. Much of it is still very funny, but there's a twist at the end that has aged very badly.

I've never preached on the book of Esther before, but I want to address it tonight – not just the extract we heard, but the book as a whole – because the reason the ending has aged badly is quite important in understanding events in the nightly news at the moment.

Now I know a few of you got intrigued by the extracts we've had at our Vespers liturgies in the past week, and so have read the whole book of Esther in the last few days (it's barely ten chapters), but for those who are not so familiar with it, let me give you a summary of the book and its obvious satire.

The story of Esther is set in the city of Susa, capital of the first Persian empire, during the fifth century BCE. This is after Babylonians had taken the Jews into exile and after the Persians had let them return home, but lots of Jews didn't go home and, just like today, there were thriving Jewish communities throughout the empire. And just like ever since, they were periodically the victims of anti-semitic attacks that sought to destroy them or assimilate them so thoroughly they would disappear. Part of resisting that and maintaining their religious and cultural identity was to keep themselves distinct, and to poke fun at their more godless contemporaries and their attackers. The story of Esther is a sitcom that does just that.

It takes place in the royal court of Persia, and it is really taking the piss out of the pomposity and hedonistic excesses of the Persian elites. Everything is exaggerated beyond ridiculous for comedic effect. It starts with the Persian king holding a lavish banquet and drinking party for

dignitaries from all over his empire, a party that goes for – get this – a hundred and eighty days! How does the empire continue to operate if all its leaders go on a six month bender?!

Towards the end of this six months of debauchery, the king calls for his ravishingly beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, to come and flaunt her beauty in front of a room full of high ranking men, wearing her crown and, from her refusal, you are probably supposed to hear that as wearing nothing but her crown. Vashti's refusal creates a comedic crisis of insecure masculinity that reverberates around the empire. What if all the Persian wives are inspired by Vashti's example to start refusing the demands of their clueless dinosaur husbands?

So to avert such an outbreak of feminist rebellion, Vashti is banished from the palace, but before long the king, probably suffering a massive hangover, is feeling all lonely and deprived. Dial up the ridiculous debauchery again and his advisers suggest that they round up all the most beautiful young virgins from all over the empire and bring them into the royal harem so that the king can have a different woman every night until he decides which one he wants as his new queen. To add to the excess, they all get twelve months of lavish beauty treatments before they are called into the royal bedroom for their try-out.

The hero of our story is Esther, a gorgeous young Jewish woman who is brought in during this round up and who eventually wins the contest to become queen. You will see modern bible commentators demurely describing this is a beauty contest, but it is perfectly clear from the text that it is a sex contest. Far from being the typical pious nun-like religious heroine, Esther is made queen because she gives the king the hottest night of sex of his entire pleasure-seeking life, and he wants more of that thanks. Esther keeps her ethnicity secret, though, so we are being alerted to the issue of anti-semitism, alongside a bawdy gloat over how hot Jewish women are.

Once she is established as queen, the scene changes and a new pantomime villain is introduced. If the king was like a cartoon self-absorbed Donald Trump, Haman is your cartoon Vladimir Putin, equally obsessed with his own image and importance, but more openly villainous and blood-thirsty. Haman has ingratiated himself with the king and risen to be second in command, and that means everyone is supposed to bow down to him in the street. But pious Jews objected to bowing down to anyone but God, so a Jew named Mordecai, who happens to be Esther's uncle and childhood guardian, refuses to bow down to Haman, and sets off a murderous chain of reprisals.

There's a funny interlude where Haman is plotting against Mordecai while the king, unbeknown to Haman, sets out to reward Mordecai for a past favour by making him Australian of the Year, sorry, Persian of the Year, and tells an ashen faced Haman to conduct the public award presentation.

Haman's lust for retribution continues though, and in keeping both with the comedic excesses and the serious theme of anti-semitism, Haman decides that rather than just murder Mordecai, he will dupe the clueless king into believing that these unwelcome foreigners are eating the pets, and get him to approve an order to commit genocide and slaughter every Jew in the empire. The king still hasn't realised that Esther is Jewish, so he's unwittingly signing a death warrant that includes his own favourite sex-goddess.

Things get a bit darker from here, although there are still plenty of ridiculous comic interludes and double-entendres. Sex goddess though she is, Esther is only permitted to approach the king if he asks for her. Anyone who approaches uninvited can be executed on the spot unless the king pardons them. But Esther dolls herself up and rolls the dice, approaching the king to plead for her people and the king pardons her by “holding out his golden sceptre” (nudge, nudge, wink, wink; obvious phallic euphemism fully intended).

Actually, in the scene we heard tonight, she first makes a big show of inviting the king and Haman to a private banquet, two nights in a row, and there is another joke running as Haman gloats to his family about being the sole invitee alongside the king, only to find out that he is really there so that Esther can blow the whistle on his genocide plan. There is another slapstick scene as Haman falls down to plead for Esther’s mercy while the king is out at the bathroom, and his fate is sealed when the king walks back in and thinks that Haman is trying to molest his private sex-goddess. For the final bit of ridiculous and grotesque exaggeration, Haman had built a gallows as high as a six story building, hoping to hang Mordecai on it, but ends up being hung on it himself.

Then it is revealed that orders signed by the king of Persia cannot be revoked, so to undo the genocidal impact of his own unwitting order, the king allows for another order to go out in his name giving the Jews permission to fight back and defend themselves, and thus what was to have been the day of their annihilation becomes the day of their salvation and victory over an anti-semitic plot, and is remembered ever after in the Jewish national holiday of Purim.

The holiday of Purim carries on the comedy of the story to this day. Everyone goes to the synagogue to listen to the whole book of Esther being read, and on each of the 54 times the name of Haman – the archetypal anti-semite – is mentioned in the reading, everyone drowns out his name with noise; children rattling special noisemakers and adults stamping their feet after first writing Haman’s name on the soles of their shoes. People wear fancy dress costumes, and everyone is required to eat and drink and enjoy themselves, with some of the ancient rabbis even saying that people should drink wine on Purim until they can no longer distinguish between the phrases “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordecai”!

So, back to my opening comments about a joke that hasn’t aged well; what am I referring to?

It’s not the obvious sexist stuff about pompous but insecure powerful men who think they take any woman they want, grab them by the pussy even, and assume that they’re above the law. Not only has nothing much changed there, but that sort of behaviour is precisely what is being ridiculed in the book of Esther. It is the target of the joke, not the unquestioned prejudice of the joke, so that has actually aged quite well.

What is it that has aged badly then? Don’t be embarrassed if you’re not guessing the answer, because I skipped over the crucial details in my telling just now, so it’s an unfair question.

In the dark shadowy bit at the end of the story, when the Jews of the Persian empire are given permission to defend themselves against their attackers, they go way beyond self-defence. It says, and I quote, “So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them” (Esther 9:5). Five hundred people were killed in the city of Susa alone, and as the king then said, “If in the

citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people, what have they done in the rest of the king's provinces?" (Esther 9:12) Nevertheless, they literally double down. At Esther's request, the king permits a second day of rampant slaughter. Another three hundred people are killed in Susa, and the bodies of the ten sons of Haman are strung up for a gruesome public display.

In previous years I have almost not noticed those details, buried as they are under the outrageous sitcom of the main part of the story.

But almost 12 months ago, an anti-semitic and anti-Zionist terrorist organisation called Hamas (almost sounds like Haman) went on a murderous rampage in southern Israel, murdering over 1200 people, and assaulting, raping, wounding, traumatising and kidnapping countless others. And in retaliation, cloaked in the language of self-defence, Israel, a nation that celebrates the story of Esther as a big joke every year, has killed more than 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza, most of them innocent civilians who do not even support Hamas. And now the killing has expanded into Lebanon where more than 700 people have been killed in the past week, and there are no signs of anything but further escalation.

The Israeli Defence Forces have a longstanding military strategy of responding to attacks with disproportionate force and mass destruction. It's called the "Dahiya Doctrine" (also spelt Dahya or Dahieh) and, [as described by an Israeli commander](#), it argues that faced with an enemy like Hamas or Hezbollah, Israel "should target economic interests and the centres of civilian power that support the organisation", aiming to harm the civilian population so much that they will then turn against the militants, forcing the enemy to sue for peace. [In the words of one expert in international law](#), this "is not only an overt violation of the most elementary norms of the law of war and of universal morality, but an avowal of a doctrine of violence that needs to be called by its proper name: state terrorism."

So when you join the dots from the slaughter of 800 people in Susa two and a half thousand years ago to the state terrorism being waged in Gaza and Lebanon today by a nation raised on the Esther sitcom, it's hard to keep laughing at it. It has dated even worse than the Benny Hill show, and with much more serious consequences.

Anti-semitism is a horrific curse upon the world, and as we see from the book of Esther, it is far from new. Anti-semitism has produced some of the worst atrocities in human history. But surely it is time we learned from history that wreaking retribution on the enemies of Israel does not and can not reduce anti-semitism or bring peace and security to Israel and the Jewish people.

In the aftermath of the unimaginable horrors of the holocaust, the biggest anti-semitic atrocity in history, the modern state of Israel was created to give the Jewish people a place of refuge and safety. But Israel's actions since then – both its apartheid system and its brutal wars to crush opposition to that system – have increasingly squandered that international goodwill and created more and more bitter enemies among its neighbours, and as a result, Israel is now the most unsafe place in the world to be a Jew.

One has to wonder whether there is something in the concept of being the chosen ones which too easily mutates into a toxic sense of entitlement and superiority, and a lack of respect for the lives of others, which actually then fuels the fires of anti-semitism. For all too often, the

Israeli response to anti-semitism has looked like its ugly mirror image, almost indistinguishable from it.

I haven't mentioned God yet in this sermon, and that's probably appropriate because the book of Esther never mentions God either (Esther and Song of Songs are the only two books in the Bible that don't mention God). But the God made known to us in Jesus, the God of Israel, weeps equally over every victim of anti-semitism and every victim of disproportionate Israeli retribution.

And as we heard in tonight's gospel reading, the God made known to us in Jesus calls us to de-toxify our understanding of chosenness, and stop imagining it as a closed circle whose borders we must patrol, whose membership we must police, and whose occupants are uniquely privileged and protected. When Jesus's disciples tried to regulate who could claim to be acting in Jesus's name and exclude those who they didn't think belonged to the chosen group, Jesus resorted to language as comedically exaggerated and grotesque as anything in the book of Esther to show how seriously he took their failure to follow his lead in opening the circle of chosenness to whosoever would come.

Better that you be thrown into the sea with a great millstone tied round your necks; better that you cut off your own feet and hands and gouge out your own eyes, than that you put obstacles in anyone's way and restrict their access to the circle of love and mercy into which God has chosen to invite everyone.

There is a pathway to peace and hope for the whole world, but it looks nothing like the ancient or current Israeli policies of taking retribution on enemies, let alone deliberately disproportionate retribution. Instead it is a path shown to us by Jesus, one who knows personally what it is to be a victim of both Israel's enemies and of Israel's own religious and political establishment. It is the path of the cross, the path of renouncing all vengeance and retribution, and instead learning to love our enemies. It's a path that will get us crucified as often as not. But as Jesus has shown us, even crucifixion cannot entomb the love and life of God.

If the dark underbelly of the book of Esther makes you cringe in horror like a badly dated Two Ronnies sketch, it's probably a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in you, calling you to another way, the way of the cross, the way of Jesus. Trust the Spirit, and let's follow the crucified Jesus together, on into the wide open spaces of God's love.