

Esther 7:1 – 8:8

Wrath and responsibility

Nowadays we get some totally ridiculous situations due to our safety-obsessive culture. So there was the case when I think it might have been McDonalds were sued for their hot coffee being hot, but without a specific warning on the take-away cup. Or bags of salted peanuts with the warning phrase, *may contain nuts*. Nuts ... that's about right, as far as I can see.

But I think warnings can make a bit more sense when it comes to TV programmes. Although you *could* take the line that we should expect *anything* at 9.00 or later to contain bad language, I think it has to be appropriate to flag up certain kinds of content before someone ventures into the programme itself.

So I wonder what kind of warning the book of Esther should come with. There have been some bits of it that clearly descend to the level of farce and pantomime humour. We had the prize example of that in chapter 6, with Ahasuerus the emperor and Haman the prime minister talking at total cross-purposes.

Haman, you might remember, had arrived extra early in the palace to get the emperor to execute Mordecai, while that very night Ahasuerus had been unable to sleep. And during those unexpected hours of consciousness, he become conscious that Mordecai had been overlooked for a royal reward for loyal service. Haman is thrown by the emperor's initial question:

So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?"

(Esther 6:6)

For the only time in the book, the writer breaks cover, and makes it totally clear to his readers what is going on *inside someone's head*:

And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?"

(Esther 6:6)

And so his answer reflects what he would indeed *love* to have done *for himself* ... only to be told to go and do that *in person* to Mordecai the one person in the world Haman hated more than anyone else:

Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned."

(Esther 6:10)

And then we can imagine for ourselves just how Mordecai must have been grinding his teeth in between shouting out, "Thus shall it be done to the man the king delights to honour!" ... and we are rolling in the aisles. Wonderful U classified stuff. Bring the kids. Let em laugh!

But there is a very dark side to this book as well. Haman is not the caricature of a pantomime villain, even if he comes a cropper like one in chapter 6. He is a seriously nasty piece of work. Because this Mordecai is Jewish, and because Haman is a descendant of a line notorious for their hatred of Jews down through the centuries, Haman takes Mordecai's lack of honour for him as grounds to instigate a *genocide* of the Jews across the empire's 127 provinces. So that raises this to PG at least.

But when we get to today's chapters, and on towards the end of the book, I think it gets stronger again. Not that a genocide isn't horrendous, but earlier on in the book, it's a word, a concept, and it's still some time in the future. We left chapter 5 with a very *personal* shadow over the coming chapters, as an enormous gibbet is constructed:

Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

(Esther 5:14)

We know that Mordecai has escaped this fate, in chapter 6. But chapter 7 is going to see the gallows put to use. And the final chapters are going to escalate still further to include deaths by the thousands. This is suddenly not a totally fun story. You might think it should come with a warning before you open its pages.

But we left the story poised between the comedy and the coming tragedy. Haman has been publicly humiliated by having to honour Mordecai in front of everyone in Susa. And then he goes home to a very cold and unsympathetic reception. His friends ... even his *wife* ... now reckon he is onto a loser. Or maybe, he *is* one.

And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "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."

(Esther 6:13)

And then we are interrupted by the last simple moment of comedy. He doesn't even get a chance to grab himself a cuppa at home before he's whisked off back to the palace.

While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

(Esther 6:14)

Oh yes, Esther and the king. A *second* banquet. Haman had been so delighted, a mere day ago, to have been invited back as the sole guest of King and Queen, to hear what Queen Esther would ask for from the most powerful man in the world. And yet all of that must have just dropped out of his mind as all this other stuff with Mordecai has happened in the morning. Only now the king's summons whisks him off again ... as we pick up the story in chapter 7. A scarily brief chapter, if we stop to think about it. How quickly things *can* change, when God works behind the scenes.

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther.

(Esther 7:1)

And the word used there suggests there was once again going to be plenty of drink. That was a warning sign, back in chapter 1. Don't expect ever for things to run smoothly when there is a lot of booze around. But it looks as if things are running smoothly. The words here are almost exactly a re-run of the previous day's session:

And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

(Esther 7:2)

This time, Esther is finally going to come to the point of these meetings with the king. There was that initial one, when she risked her life in going to see the king unsummoned. That was followed immediately by a first banquet, at which she had simply asked the king to come to *this* one. And *all* of those things, by divine providence, come to a head within this first day, Ahasuerus' sleepless night, and now this second day. 24 hours to turn around the fate of a nation – and seal the fate of this instigator of the planned carnage.

But again, Esther is subtle in how she speaks. Again, there's an obliqueness to how she puts this. She has to be careful what she says around the king, even now. If she accuses him of being inept in his role – even if he was! – that's not going to achieve her purpose. So it suits her to play down Ahasuerus' responsibility, and focus on the main mover of this outrage ... when the moment is just right.

So she has been asked about a "wish" and a "request", and that's how she answers.

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request."

(Esther 7:3)

Right now the king is going to be mightily confused. The queen's *life* is in danger?? And what's this about a "people"? Remember, Esther has kept her ethnic identity quiet. So Ahasuerus didn't know, when he casually signed the death warrant of all the Jews in his empire, that he was signing the death warrant of his own queen, too.

So an explanation is needed:

"For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king."

(Esther 7:4)

She knows very precisely what she is saying here. And I suspect that when Haman hears this, he is going to be chilled to the bone. What she says shows she knows *exactly* what he had been doing in his plotting. First of all, that word "sold", a couple of times. Remember that Haman had gladly contributed his own money – posing as a national benefactor – into this plan to dispose of the Jews. But, in practice, it wasn't very far off just a simple but spectacular bribe:

“If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king’s business, that they may put it into the king’s treasuries.”

(Esther 3:9)

Implication – which probably passes over the king’s head, actually – was that the Jews had been *bought*, with the king’s permission, from right under his nose. Yes, Ahasuerus was actually the unwitting seller. Esther’s hinting that he was maybe also a victim of this scheming. That would not go down too well ... when the penny dropped that he had been mightily *duped*!

And then there is Esther’s using the very same words that had been part of that earlier decree penned by Haman: destroyed, killed, annihilated. Here it was, a couple of chapters back:

Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, ...

(Esther 3:13)

And yet, Esther suggests, it’s the *king* who is the victim of all of this. The *king’s* interests will suffer if this plot is not foiled. The people had been slaves before, in Egypt – so is she hinting that they could survive that again, if that had been all that was intended? ... but *this*, this *genocide* ... *that* would leave the king open to accusations of stupidity and mismanagement of the economy:

“If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.”

(Esther 7:4)

I’m not sure if at this point the king has *really* put all of this together. But he has grasped *enough*.

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?”

(Esther 7:5)

And Haman clearly has seen that he is now in *serious* trouble, as Esther names names.

And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

(Esther 7:6)

Much of the time, this king has been a bit of a comic figure, easily manipulated, terribly indecisive. But he is still king. And he is a king in a towering *rage* now. And even a half-blind bull can make quite a mess of a china shop. Currently, I’m guessing, he’s speechless. He runs outside to try to gather his thoughts and make sense of all of this.

And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, ...

(Esther 7:7)

... and to decide what he needs to do now. *Finally*, it seems, this man is going to decide *something* for himself – and, by the looks of it, it ain't going to be too good for Haman's future.

... but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

(Esther 7:7)

But now, one final, *fatal* coincidence.

And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"

(Esther 7:8)

Now that isn't a serious attempt at "assault", of course. We might have called it a "compromising position", but what is happening here is a serious violation of court etiquette. The queen was *not* to be approached by anyone other than the king. Think social distancing regulations, but designed to protect the honour of the queen. In essence, it's a picture of the unapproachability of holiness, that the queen was dedicated solely to the king, and the integrity of that was marked out by everyone having to keep ... it was probably about 2 or 3 metres, actually.

So Haman's approach to the queen is a serious violation of this protocol. And perhaps this served as a convenient explanation for a summary execution. All this stuff about the king stupidly letting Haman have his signet ring, that could be quietly hushed up. This would now be about the Queen's honour and the King's strength – rather than the king's being manipulated.

And maybe the servants realise that this is the best way to play it, too. They had heard the word from the king's mouth. So, yet again, it seems that the king *doesn't* decide; they decide on his behalf where this should lead:

As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.

(Esther 7:8)

And if you couldn't work out what that implied, well, read on. Another suggestion that the king will gladly take. *Just occurs to me, your Majesty ...*

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high."

(Esther 7:9)

And when has this king ever been able to turn down a piece of advice!

And the king said, "Hang him on that."

(Esther 7:9)

So they did. Incident over.

So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

(Esther 7:10)

But the bigger problem still isn't solved. Great that Mordecai has been saved from Haman's plotting. Great, you probably think, that Haman got what was coming to him. But there is still that problem of the countdown to genocide. That clock is still ticking.

So Ahasuerus maybe does make some decisions of his own, now. A traitor's estate was forfeit to the Crown. But here's royal generosity – or does the king think that throwing money at a problem will make it go away? Will this calm Esther down, do you think?

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

(Esther 8:1)

And a new Prime Minister is needed ... and here is one recently honoured by the king, *and* now, he finds, favoured by his queen:

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai.

(Esther 8:1-2)

And just for good measure, Esther puts Mordecai in charge of her new estates:

And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

(Esther 8:2)

But it's *not* sorted. These two heroes cannot ride off peacefully into the sunset. The laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be repealed, and there is a date set in recent legislation for the killing, the destruction and the annihilation of the Jews. So even if Ahasuerus thinks he's done a good day's work and can now knock off early, Esther is still on the case.

Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

(Esther 8:3)

Probably not as dangerous as her approach to the king a couple of chapters back, but the same royal approval is needed, by the looks of it.

When the king held out the golden sceptre to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king.

(Esther 8:4)

And just listen to her now pleading even more strongly than ever she had done before:

And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, ..."
(Esther 8:5)

Asking for what to everyone else seems obvious ... but also equally obviously impossible. Yet she *has* to ask. She *has* to press for ... well, *something* to be done. There has to be *something*, surely?

"... let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For 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?"
(Esther 8:5-6)

But here we see, once again, this rather sad, victim-of-circumstances king. He has no idea where to go from here. From his point of view, there is no way around this situation. But you can try, I guess. Although it's hopeless, really ... Not even my signet ring, that symbol of my supposedly absolute power of command over 127 provinces, can sort *this* mess out. *Do what you can ...*

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."
(Esther 8:7-8)

That's where we're going to park the story again today, with one final episode to follow. You *know* how it has to end, because you know the Jews *weren't* wiped out. And you know how it has to end, because the Jews *mustn't* be wiped out. God all along had something in mind for that people – and personally, I don't think his goodness to that race has run its full course yet, either.

But it strikes me that in these chapters we've been looking at today, this king Ahasuerus is really quite a sad figure. We have seen him livid with anger. Yes, the king can *rage*, all right – and we've seen it before, in the first chapter, seething over the previous queen's refusal to come and be ogled at his boozy party. And there are those verses in Proverbs which speak about the wrath of a king:

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it.
(Proverbs 16:14)

A king's wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favour is like dew on the grass.
(Proverbs 19:12)

A servant who deals wisely has the king's favour, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully.
(Proverbs 14:35)

And that last verse is exactly what we have seen here with the contrasting fates of Mordecai and Haman ... and yet this king Ahasuerus still doesn't really seem very *kingly*, does he? No matter what you might feel about the monarchy in this country, and present

or previous governments, would *you* vote for someone like him in a position of power in 21st century Britain ... or would you suddenly become republican if he were next in line to *our* throne?

Yes, he can *rage* like the king we're warned of in Proverbs ... but he's not the kind of person you would really want to be in a position of responsibility, is he? When it was on *his* watch that Haman pushes through an order of casual genocide ... when he had been persuaded to let the sly bribe count for more than the lives of at least hundreds of thousands of innocent lives ... and there doesn't seem to be the slightest interest in making things *right* again afterwards.

When it comes to the fate of the Jews, he just seems to me to retreat into vagueness. He *dodges* responsibility, and I guess that is because, as we've seen down through the pages of this book, he is chronically unable to take decisions.

In many ways, just as I suggested way back in chapter 1, that Ahasuerus is like the negative images that you used to get back with your developed photographs, back before the modern digital revolution. His characteristics are very sadly opposite to what we would all hope for, and long for, and insist upon, in a leader. If all the candidates in an election were on a par with him, it would be a real problem deciding who to vote for.

We've seen him in just this section raging and ranting.

And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking ...

(Esther 7:7)

We've had yet another reminder of just how taking his own decisions is beyond him.

As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona ... said, "Moreover, the gallows ..." And the king said, "Hang him on that."
(Esther 7:8-9)

There was the materialism that led to his eyes spinning and going *ka-ching* in response to Haman's bribery

"If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver ..."
(Esther 3:9)

Materialism and gullibility, not a good combination. Inept, naive corruptibility. And a further nasty: pride – which we saw particularly saw fuelling his first temper tantrum:

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, ...
(Esther 1:12)

Of course, that flying off the handle isn't just down to pride. Don't you think that it was significant that drink played a big part of that particular incident? So there's a more general lack of self-discipline and self-control, too.

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded ... the seven eunuchs ... to bring Queen Vashti ...

(Esther 1:10-11)

And I suggested, those couple of months ago – back when we could actually gather in person for times like this – this *negative* image was meant to make us long for the *positive* we all feel there *could* be, there *should* be, there *must* be. We have this instinct – even if it's not perfect – for *justice*. We have a very keen – if unbalanced – sense that cries out, particularly if we perceive ourselves as victim, *that's not fair!* We know, deep in our bones, that we need better than Ahasuerus, better than King David, the “man after God's heart” who still managed to fall abominably when given too much power.

We think it's great that Mordecai, in many ways the opposite of Ahasuerus, modest, calm, decisive, clear-thinking, assertive, ends up in a position we think he will do justice to .. and probably justice *in*, as well:

And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

(Esther 8:2)

But we know that we need more than a whole dynasty of Mordecais to bring justice to this world. Because we see something else here about Ahasuerus. For all his bad character traits, there is one way in which he is just normal and human, and even Mordecai will never be able to rise above this: he is *limited*.

He is responsible for that bad law that he has enacted, but he cannot do anything about it. He has let this tiger out of its cage, and not he just cannot put it back. There are things about this world and this life that are beyond us to do anything about. The Medes and Persians are actually just like us, and we are just like them:

“... an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.”

(Esther 8:8)

We have power enough to make a mess of things, but not to put things right again. Even if Mordecai and Esther are going to find a way *around* that edict, they cannot *repeal* it.

And if we are going to be saved, it is beyond the possibilities of any mere human. We need someone from outside the system, not bounded by our human limitedness, not corrupted by our human sinfulness. We don't just need a king better than Ahasuerus; we need a king better than David. And when we come to the opening verse of the NT, heads up! We *have* a king better than David!

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, ...

(Matthew 1:1)

It's really a theme running through the whole of this book of Esther: God is conspicuous by his absence. And the same through the whole of the OT, that book of questions ... Who? When? Where? How? ... that we don't even start to get real clarity about until the NT. When the *real* King better than David arrives on the scene. When the *real* prophet greater than Moses starts to speak words full of truth and grace. When the *real* high priest greater than Aaron lifts up his pierced hands to bless his people from the cross.

Where God entered human history in person, and personally assumed responsibility to do what we ourselves cannot do. Where the wrath of God is satisfied by the death of an *innocent, willing* victim, not like Haman, caught by surprise by the quirks of coincidence, but by the Good Shepherd deliberately becoming ...

“... the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

(John 1:29)

That is where the story of Esther points us. That is where *all* these curious paths of the OT will take us, if we have eyes to see. To the foot of the cross. And that's where *we* will join together now: at the foot of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Once again to remember. Once again to proclaim ... the Lord's death, *until he comes*.