

Witnessing well in a hostile world (Esther 2:19-3:15)

Over the last month I've heard lots in the media about Christianity, most of it presented in a negative light.

No doubt you saw the headlines last month, declaring that Jesus had been banned in Queensland school playgrounds. Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones had said, "Religious instructors should be reminded that students should not be encouraged to evangelise other students at the school", and suggested that evangelism included speaking about Jesus, distributing religious themed Christmas cards, and inviting friends to church.

Then last month in Tasmania, the state anti-discrimination commissioner accepted a complaint against a Presbyterian Minister, Campbell Markham, and a street preacher for offending atheists and gays. Markham said this was an attack on the rights of all Australians to speak their beliefs. We remember also two years ago that Julian Porteous, the Catholic bishop of Hobart, also faced a similar complaint for sending a Catholic pamphlet to Catholic School Students entitled, "Don't mess with marriage."

As Christians, we live in a time such as this where our faith is being tested. As Christians, we are being silenced in the public sphere and it seems that free speech is being taken away from us. But I wouldn't call this "persecution" yet, because it is nothing compared to what our Christian brothers and sisters in North Korea, Syria and Iraq are experience. For them, persecution means being tortured and driven out of their homes because of their faith in Jesus, being imprisoned, beheaded or crucified. For Christians in the West, as we speak on issues on abortion, euthanasia, and marriage we seem to be easy targets to be picked on.

In Esther 3, we see that Mordecai was targeted by the Persian official, Haman, because he refused to kneel or pay honour to him. And through this small action God sets forward a chain of events that lead to the lives of all the Jews being put in danger.

As we compare our situation in Australia with Syria, Iraq or even the time of Esther there is no comparison in what they go through. But as Christians there is a promise made by Jesus in Matthew 10:22, "You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

This morning I want us to learn what is our response when the world becomes hostile to us and tries to silence us through threats? What do we do, and how do we witness well?

Love Your Neighbour (2:19-23)

In the first two chapters of Esther, the author establishes that Xerxes is a horrible king. He was also an unpopular king. And so, we pick up the story in chapter 3, as Mordecai, Esther's uncle, overhears a plot to assassinate Xerxes by Bigthana and Teresh, two eunuchs in service of the king.

Eunuchs were men who worked in the king's harem, with all of his concubines. In order to prevent any untoward behavior between the king's men and the women in his harem, the King would first have the men castrated. Of course, just like the women taken from their homes and placed in the harem, the eunuchs were also removed from their families, against their will. They had no choice in the matter – it was like being drafted into the military. You now belong to the king, he's called your number, he's going to castrate you, and you're going to work in the palace.

Bigthana and Teresh were supposed to be guards, responsible for protecting the King. These two guys had close enough access to assassinate the King. And as eunuchs, they had plenty of motivation - they were forced into service, their bodies mutilated, isolated from their family and friends - and they weren't happy about it.

Somehow Mordecai overhears this and he knows that the King's life is in danger. Mordecai has a choice to make. Xerxes is a bad man, a bad king. Will Mordecai do a good thing for a bad man? Will he say something and spare his life or will he remain silent and allow Xerxes to be executed, to be murdered?

The Jews also would have despised how King Xerxes treated their people. It would be indeed tempting to remain silent and allow Xerxes to be murdered and hope for a better king. But instead, Mordecai goes to Esther, and instructs her to relay this important piece of information to the King. Esther made sure the king knew to give credit to Mordecai.

The allegation was investigated and found to be true. Both men were hanged in the gallows. But the author here leaves us again with some important information that is useful later in the story. He writes in verse 23,

“All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.”

The author includes this little note to make it clear that Xerxes knew exactly who was going to kill him and exactly who saved his life. Often the one who saves the King's life is to be rewarded greatly and quickly. But Mordecai doesn't get any credit for his part in exposing the assassination plot. Instead, another officer instead gets all the credit. It seems unfair, but the book of Esther keeps reminding us that God is sovereign over all things.

But there is something we need to explore in terms of Mordecai's decision in relaying this information to the King. How tempting was it for Mordecai to stay silent or even plot with the guards in bringing Xerxes down? We cannot be entirely sure of Mordecai's intentions. He is insistent that he receives credit for foiling the assassination plot, perhaps hoping to take advantage of the reward or as a bargaining chip for the Jews. Or maybe, he really did hope to unselfishly save the King's life.

And yet, we learn two things here. First the Lord orchestrates it so that Mordecai isn't acknowledged or rewarded for his intervention. Xerxes, instead, promoted the Persian officer, Haman, crediting it to him. But the Lord is sovereign, and as the story unfolds, we will see how Mordecai's act lead to the salvation of the Jews.

Second, there is an attitude of mercy in Mordecai's heart. Regardless of his motives to receive reward, he was looking out Xerxes and was even loyal to him. It's hard to comprehend because Xerxes was a terrible enemy of the Jews. Why would a Jew help someone who was his enemy?

A lot of people who read the Old Testament often ask me why God is such an angry God, commanding the Israelites to destroy other nations - and then suddenly in the New Testament He's all about love and mercy. And many assume that the Old Testament teaches God's people to hate their enemies. Jesus even said from Matthew 5:43:

Matt. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

Matt. 5:44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Yet there is nowhere in the Old Testament that teaches God's people to hate their enemies. Jesus is not correcting God's words, but the wrong teachings of the Pharisees and scribes. And Jesus' teaching about loving enemies isn't something new. Throughout the Old Testament there are several passages about caring for the wellbeing of our enemies.

Prov. 24:17 Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice,

Prov. 24:18 or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.

Prov. 25:21 ¶ If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

Prov. 25:22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.

There are passages in the Old Testament that teach us to care for the enemy and Mordecai sought to care even for Xerxes who took away his cousin Esther who treated her like a daughter.

Now I am not saying that this is easy. In fact, it's very hard, we would rather read the verses in Exodus 21 of the compensation laws of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. To take revenge, to return the same favour for grief and hurt caused. It was hard for Mordecai to not take revenge, but he didn't.

Friends, we have all been hurt by people, by friends, by family members and it's hard to show love and mercy. Maybe your work mates have made false accusations behind your back, robbing you of a promotion. Perhaps you had a falling out with one of your friends, who stabbed you in the back with malicious gossiping or over a disagreement in politics or religion. You might have difficulty with one of your next-door neighbours who constantly abuses you, even when you have done nothing wrong. You might have difficulty with your own family members who continue to discredit you, try to push you out of family matters or try to play favorites with your parents. It's easy to get personal, and seek revenge and justice.

How much harder is it to show mercy, grace and forgiveness? How hard is it to turn the other cheek? How hard is it that if someone wants to sue you, you let them take what they want and give them more than they asked for?

Yet consider Jesus, whose enemies challenged him, questioned him, arrested him, blindfolded him, beat him, spat on him, and even gave him over to be crucified on the cross. Yet on the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Imagine how hard it was for Jesus, the Son of God, through whom all things – and people – were made, to restrain His power and His rights as He was brutalized. It was hard for Mordecai to show mercy and grace to his enemy, King Xerxes. And it will be hard for us too. But we are supposed to be different from the world and our master Lord Jesus calls us to follow Him, even when it comes to loving our enemies.

Faith Revealed (3:1-6)

We remember from our last lesson on Esther, Mordecai firmly instructed Esther to keep her family background and nationality a secret. So remember at this point, nobody knows that Esther's Jewish. Basically Mordecai said, "whatever you do, don't let folks know that you believe in the God of the Bible."

Now is it wrong to hide our faith?

Many of us here were taught that faith, or religion, or spirituality is a private thing, not a public thing. It's something that you need to hold within you, but not share with others around you. But when we come across passages in Matthew where Jesus preaches in His the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt. 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

Matt. 5:15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

Matt. 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

And in 1 Peter 3:15-

1Pet. 3:15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

Passages like this tell us that our faith must be public. We must be ready to tell others about our faith and that we belong to God. Not just talk about it – but also live in a way that demonstrates it. Now I'm not saying that we are to throw ourselves at the first opportunity we get. Of course, everyone needs to know about the hope we have in Jesus, but we are also to be wise and winsome in the way we share the gospel.

And so, I'm not saying that we always need to introduce ourselves to new people as a Christian, or wear a shirt with a slogan about Jesus. But if there are parts of your life where you are actively hiding the fact that you are Christian – maybe because you don't want to suffer publicly, you don't want to be mocked, you don't want to be opposed, or you don't want anybody to dislike you - then what you worship is not Christ, but ultimately, your own comfort.

As we continue with the story of both Mordecai and Esther, we see that they begin to find themselves in situations where they will reveal their faith in the Lord God. We begin to see this as we get to Mordecai coming out of his shell of comfort, and revealing his faith through his actions.

How did Mordecai get there? Remember that Mordecai was meant to get a reward in foiling the plot of the King's assassination? Well some four years have passed and still Mordecai wasn't acknowledged, but at last the King decided to promote one of his officials. Surely it should have been Mordecai right? Well, no, the King instead promoted Haman who is elevated above all the other nobles. Haman basically becomes Xerxes' right hand man.

So, Haman is elevated to second in charge of Persia, and it was customary to give honour by bowing down to him. But, Mordecai refused. Imagine that scene of all the

officials, Mordecai was the only one left standing and not paying respect to Haman. This takes guts to do that and there are two reasons why he did what he did.

Firstly, it was because of who Haman was.

He is the ultimate villain in this narrative – even moreso than Xerxes. Haman was an Agagite, a descendent of the Amalekites. The Israelites and the Amalekites go way back to the time of Moses, in Exodus 17, when the Amalekites attacked God's people in the desert.

Because of that assault, the Lord declared that there will be a lasting enmity between the two peoples. A couple of hundred years later, the Lord told King Saul (in 1 Samuel 15) to destroy Amalek and even all his livestock. But Saul failed to carry out this task. Instead he spared Amalek's life - probably for ransom - and took the best livestock for himself. In the end, Saul's selfish disobedience saw him rejected by God and abandoned.

But as we see in Esther, several hundred years later the conflict has come full circle and here Israel is still reeling in its consequences. The writer of Esther mentioned in an earlier chapter, that Mordecai was a Benjamite, meaning a descendant of King Saul. So, not only did Mordecai have beef with Haman because of their tribal history; but Haman had also taken a promotion that Mordecai rightfully deserved.

Secondly, it is possible Mordecai did not want to break the first commandment. The First Commandment is "You will have no other gods before me", and the Jews understood this to mean not bowing to any king or idol other than the Lord Himself. We saw this in both the stories of Daniel and Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego as they refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar because they would only honour the Lord God.

Whatever his reason for not bowing to Haman, Mordecai's action revealed his family background and religion. He made the choice to stand up to be counted as one of the Lord God's people, and He confidently informed the other officials that he was a Jew.

Of course, that infuriated Haman. He grasped the opportunity for revenge, not just to destroy Mordecai but to destroy all the Jews from the whole Kingdom of Xerxes. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

We know in our current political climate standing up for our faith in Jesus can be socially risky. And in many parts of the world, standing up for your faith in Jesus will get you killed. We live in a time such as this.

But when we stand up for the Lord, it's a noble and mature decision to make. We will feel the heat of the moment. We might be ridiculed and even hated. Yet the whole story of Esther is about God's sovereignty. We often forget that even through our current political and social climate, our Lord is still the King of Kings and he is King of the universe. He is the one who puts rulers in their place and He is the one who deposes them.

Friends why then should we stand up? I appeal to you from Hebrews 11, the book of the Heroes of Faith. Those heroes, who clung to their faith in God throughout their lives, and

even died still clinging to their faith and the hope of heaven. Why? The writer of Hebrews tells us that they,

Heb. 11:16 They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Our hope is in Jesus, our hope is in a better country, a hope that we are waiting for where God's Kingdom will be fully realized and we want others to follow us into it. That's why we stand up by our faith and serve as a witness for many.

The hope of deliverance (3:7-15)

Several years ago we remember in the news of the persecution against Christians in Syria with the rise of the Islamic State. Christian homes in Mosul had their fences spray painted with the letter “nun”, which stands for ‘Nazarenes’. Muslims have called Christians ‘Nazarenes’ since the 7th century, as they follow the Nazarite Jesus. As each Christian home was tagged, it marked their death sentence. Any home that was tagged with the letter “nun” was free for all and if any Christian stayed they would be persecuted and slaughtered.

This is nothing new, in fact as we look at the next section of Esther from verse 7, the threat of persecution come upon God’s people in Persia. Haman was hell bent on destroying the Jews, and he hatched a plan together. The first thing to do was to consult the stars to find the most suitable date for this massacre.

So Haman held a lottery to determine the exact date and we see from verse 7:

Esth. 3:7 In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

Haman needed the King’s permission to carry this out. And we know already that Xerxes is so easily persuaded that even if his officials told him that his left hand was his right hand he would accept it. Of course, as we look from verse 8, Haman persuades the King to destroy the Jews and even asks for funding to carry out this task.

What does the King do? Just like in chapter one, he used the entire resources of the Kingdom to deliver his edict to the whole of Persia. But this edict was more sinister, as we see from verse 13:

Esth. 3:13 Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Esth. 3:14 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

Imagine that you received this letter in your letterbox and how the thought of this coming massacre would sink your heart. The day of your death has been determined for you. I can imagine that if you received this news and when it finally sinks in, who will you turn to? I would hope that your answer is that you would turn to the Lord God. I would hope that you would come to Him with a prayer of desperation. I would hope that you would come to Him and plead with him for mercy. I would hope that you would come to Him to plead that he would act.

Yet in the whole book of Esther we don’t see the name of the Lord, nor do we hear Him speak. As we read through this section of Esther, it seems that the Lord God is absent. He is silent. He isn’t doing anything and He is allowing evil to flourish and allowing those in power to do what they want.

So where is the Lord God? We see in verse 13 that Haman’s scheme to deliver out the message happens on the thirteenth day of the first month, which is the month of Nisan.

Remember the author of Esther is always placing tiny clues that point to something greater.

The date is important because it brings hope. The date is the Lord God controlling, directing and showing His power over history. Even though we may think that Haman or even Xerxes was in control and had all the power. But this date gives us an indication of timing. Haman's decree to murder God's people, it's set forth on the eve of the Passover, which goes all the way back to Exodus 12. I believe this is an amazing piece of information that provides hope. Why?

God's people are in the same situation as their brothers and sisters were in Egypt. Like the Israelites in Egypt, they were living in exile. Like the Israelites in Egypt, they were under a tyrant ruler. And like Egypt they were ruled over harshly.

The Passover is an event where God's people repent of their sins. And they take, based upon God's commands beginning in Exodus 12, a lamb without spot or blemish. They confess their sins, and then slaughter the animal to become a substitute for the punishment of sin - which is death.

And then, in a demonstration of their faith, they take the blood of the animal, and they cover the doorposts of their home. A visible sign that they are God's people, a visible sign like our Christian brothers and sisters in Mosul who had their homes spray painted in red the letter "nun." We remember that in the book of Exodus that night, the angel of Death sweeps through the nation, and brings death to the first-born-son in every home with one exception: those homes who are literally covered by the blood of the lamb in faith and repentance.

And the decree from Haman is on the eve of Passover. It's a terrible decree that comes on a day marked by hope. Haman is not the first to try to destroy God's people. The Lord delivered them from Egypt, and He will deliver them from Persia many years later. And all this is pointing toward Jesus. The whole Bible points to Jesus. Jesus is the King, seated on His throne. But he does something that no king has ever done. He gets off his throne, and he comes into human history. He doesn't threaten to destroy his enemies. In fact, he loves people, he serves people and he knows people.

More than that Jesus gives his life up for His enemies, us sinners. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And Jesus is the ultimate Passover lamb who delivers people from their sins. Like the Exodus, like Esther in Persia, the ultimate Passover in Jesus is our hope.

He is our hope because our hope is not in this world. The longer we stay in this world or try in our own strength to improve it, it will be futile, because we will experience more pain and suffering. We will face persecution. We will face all sorts of injustices like God's people in Egypt and Persia.

But just as the subtle reminder to the Jews in Persia – we have the constant reminder that God delivered His people from Egypt, His people in Persia, and He will deliver us from sin and persecution in this world and He will bring us into His promised land of the new heaven and new earth.

No more crying, no more suffering and into the arms of our loving Savior. A hope and a deliverance that is certain and we all look forward to.