

## He comes to judge the earth (is religious violence ok?)

### Series: Esther

Date: 6 July 2025

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Esther 8:1-9:28, (Romans 12.17-13.5)

On March 5, 2012, to open their discussions about Iran's nuclear program, the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu gave Barack Obama a gift. Do you know what it was? An embossed copy of the book of Esther.

Here's what he said to Congress in 2015.

"Today the Jewish people face another attempt by yet another Persian potentate to destroy us. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei spews the oldest hatred, the oldest hatred of anti-Semitism with the newest technology."<sup>1</sup>

We might agree that the anti-Semitism of Haman has its descendants to this day. But the question which Netanyahu's speech raises is, should Mordecai's response to this threat be Israel's response to Iran today? That's a personal question for us with Kamran and Nasim and Parsa and Kusha as part of our church family. And then, is this text a justification for what Israel is doing in Gaza? And how should we read this as Christians?

For us as Christians, the question is how do the events of Esther 8-9 square with Jesus' teaching to love your enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)? On the one hand the text celebrates the slaughter of some 75,000 people, and on the other hand you've got Jesus saying to 'turn the other cheek'. This question touches on the wider question of violence in the Old Testament. Just like we've seen in this series so far, Esther offers something of a case study in dealing with some of the big questions of life and some of the big questions that the Bible raises: sexism and God's absence. So today the question is: "violence in the OT, exhibit A: Esther."

You may have wrestled with this question, you may have been challenged on it from a friend at work, or maybe you're checking this whole Christianity thing out and this is one of the big obstacles to faith for you. I hope this morning will go some way to addressing it. It's too big a topic for one sermon, but it's really important, so we're having a question time after the service.

We're going to have 3 looks at the question:

### 1. Violence in the story of Esther

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/>; cf. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/netanyhus-book-of-esther-gift-for-obama-a-pointed-reminder-of-iran-threat> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/09/obama-netanyahu-israel-iran-talks>

2. Violence in the story of the Bible
3. Violence in the story of this side of glory

But before that, let's put to bed 2 bad ways of reading this text. When faced with this question one option is to say, let's ignore the Old Testament and just concentrate on Jesus. This option has an ancient pedigree. Back in the 2nd century a teacher called Marcion said the God of the Old Testament was so violent he couldn't possibly be the God we meet in Jesus. So Marcion concluded the Old Testament couldn't be part of the Bible. He didn't stop there though, he also scrapped the New Testament except Luke's gospel and Paul's letters. Marcion's approach was universally rejected by the early church and here's why. Yes, Jesus does preach the love of God. But you can't understand Jesus, or his teaching, without the Old Testament. And second, if you take Marcion's approach, you're likely to ignore the bits of the Bible you don't like, and only listen to the bits that you do like, which is just like talking to yourself in the mirror. It denies the transforming power of the Scriptures. If you're never challenged by them, you'll never be changed.

A second unhelpful way to read this text is to start with the assumption that stories like this in the Old Testament give us moral examples to follow. So when we come to a text like this we're appalled. Does God really want us to follow the example of Mordecai and the Jews here? But a helpful rule of thumb to remember when we read the Old Testament is that "narrative is NOT normative". That is, these stories are *not* in the first instance moral examples to follow. They do help us reflect on how to live as God's children, yes, but it is not a straightforward, "go and do likewise." We have to read them in the context of the whole storyline of the Bible, and particularly ask, "what difference does Jesus make to how we understand and apply this text?"

It's more work, but it's worth persevering with the bits of Scripture we find uncomfortable. So, let's look at this question of violence as we meet it in the story of Esther. Let's look again at what the text actually says.

### **1. Violence in the story of Esther**

First, you remember from our reading why the book ends with the celebration of the festival of Purim? Because Haman had plotted to annihilate the Jews, but the tables were turned, the Jews got the upper hand over those that hated them (9.1) and they got relief from their enemies (9.16). It's worth comparing what Haman's plan was, with what Mordecai's edict was in response to Haman's plan and then what the Jews actually did.

Haman's edict, back in chapter 3, sent throughout the empire was: *to annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and little children and to plunder their property on a single day.*<sup>2</sup>

We might think, surely Haman's edict could just be rescinded? But apparently not. 8.8 says: *No document written in the king's name ... can be revoked.* Hence Mordecai's edict to respond to Haman's.

What about Mordecai's edict? Have a look 8:11: *The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble to protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force that might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies.*

Notice the differences. Haman's edict was for genocide. That is, the annihilation of a specific race of people in their entirety. Mordecai's edict was for self defense. The Jews could assemble to protect themselves and destroy any armed force who sought to destroy them. Presumably that armed force didn't include women and children.

What do the Jews end up doing? (9:5, 15, 16)

They assemble to attack those seeking their destruction (9.2).

They killed their enemies, they did what they pleased to those who hated them (9.5).

Again in 9.16, in all the provinces *they assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies.*

Some 800 people (men we assume) were killed in Susa and some 75,000 throughout the empire, but, and the point is repeated 3 times, *they did not lay their hands on their plunder* (9.10, 15, 16).

Yes, the huge number of people killed raises questions for us, but the text clearly frames this as a defensive action. And, to reinforce the point, the text makes it clear that the day's fighting did not become an excuse for personal material gain. Although the edict authorised them to, they did not lay hands on the plunder of their enemies.

Second, notice that *all the nobles ... the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them* (9.3).

Despite this support, some 800 people in Susa and 75,000 people in the rest of the empire were *still* hell bent on wiping out the Jews and so persisted in attacking them. Even when all the might of the empire was backing the Jews.

This is a perverse and irrational hatred that drowns out even a sense of self-preservation. The text suggests that those who died that day were not innocent. Their hatred blinded them to the certainty of their own destruction if they pursued this course of action. Those who died, as it were, were all Hamans. And within the story as we've seen the comedy of his fall, so we too are invited to celebrate their defeat and the salvation of God's people.

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<sup>2</sup> Esther 3.13

We might find it uncomfortable, and no question it is awful, but a closer reading of the text suggests that the violence of this 13th day of the month of Adar was an occasion of self defense. A contingent, limited and restrained act of judgement upon those who sought to destroy an ethnic minority.

## 2. Violence in the story of the Bible

There is another layer to this violent episode that we discover when we read further afield in the Bible. The clue for us here comes when we're introduced to Haman. In 3.1 he's introduced as Haman the Agagite. Who are these people, the Agagites? In 1 Samuel 15, we read that Agag was the king of the Amalekites. And here we stumble across a long history of conflict. See way back in Exodus 17 when Israel were fleeing slavery in Egypt they were set upon by the Amalekites who tried to destroy them. Israel beat off the raid, but God commanded Moses to write down the event so that it be remembered, because, he says, (17.14) *I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven*. And so we read (17.16) *The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation*.<sup>3</sup> Lest we think it's an overreaction, in Numbers 14 the Amalekites attack Israel again.

Some 400 years later, the Amalekites are still a thorn in Israel's side and so God commands king Saul to wipe them out completely. Saul defeats them, but spares their king Agag, and the best of their women and their plunder. It's the catalyst for Saul's own downfall, and it seems that the remnant of the Amalekites lived on. We're not told, but could it be that Haman is a descendant of Agag, and the ancient animosity of his forebears to the Jews has been nursed in his heart? And now, 600 years later, chance would have it that he has come into such a position of power, the right hand man of the king of kings, and he can finish the job his ancestors failed at - the final solution. It's almost a dark mirror of that unseen hand of God's providence at work in Esther.

Now I don't think this makes the death of 75,000 people in one day easier to stomach, but it does add texture to the situation. It seems like this is the latest in a long history of conflict - and one in which time and again the people of God are threatened, the people from whom one day will spring the Messiah.

But we're also reminded that this conflict is perhaps not so different from ones we see today, the outbursts of hatreds that have been nursed for generations between peoples. Protestants and Catholics in northern Ireland, Serbs and Croats, Sunni and Shia in Iraq, even dare I say, Israel and Palestine.

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<sup>3</sup> cf. Numbers 14, Deuteronomy 25.17-19

It would be a bold person to suggest these conflicts had a clear, straightforward and just solution to these problems, and one that would not involve violence. Of course we want them to be resolved peaceably, and we dearly would love justice to be done without the shedding of blood, but that is incredibly difficult when hatreds that run that deep, and grievances that are added to daily.

So it would seem we're left in no better position than when we started.

Perhaps, but not quite. Yes the violence here in Esther does seem to be of the same species as other conflicts we witness. But it is also one episode in the history of salvation recorded in Holy Scripture. A story that culminates in the coming of the Messiah from the Jewish people - God humbling himself and becoming one of us. And so humble is God it seems, that he even lowers himself to use messy violent episodes like Esther to reach that end.

But please do not hear this as a justification or sanction for religious violence today, or for the actions of the nation state of Israel today. The coming of Christ does change things. And to this we turn.

### **3. Violence in the story of this side of glory**

We've perhaps raised more questions than answers, but by way of conclusion I just wanted to say 4 things about violence this side of glory.

1. There is coming a day when the Son of God will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. On that day justice will be done. Evil will be punished, and God's good creation will be cleansed from all that seeks to kill and destroy it. It will be a day of judgment and salvation, when the king returns in glory.

2. But second, this side of glory, how are we to live? Romans 12 and 13 point the way.

Romans 12.9-21 outlines what our responsibility is as the Church - we're called to love our neighbours and to not take justice into our own hands. And the reason why we don't take justice into our own hands is, because, verse 19, justice is God's job. *Don't take revenge ... but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "it is mine to avenge; I will repay"*.

3. On the other hand, in Romans 13.1-5, this side of glory, Christ has delegated his authority to judge, to human governments. It is their job to uphold justice - they are God's servants to do us good and to wield the sword, as it were, to punish the wrongdoer and restrain wickedness. So verse 14: "The one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

This model, I would suggest, is what we see in the closing chapters of Esther. The defensive action of the Jews was authorised by the Persian king as a means of upholding justice: that is punishing the wrongdoer, and doing good to protect the innocent.

It's messy. It's not perfect. It is not everything. It's not nothing. But it is something. It's the kind of imperfect justice we see this side of glory.

4. Finally, there is a fundamental difference in who the people of God are on this side of Christ. Before Christ, the people of God were the children of Israel, and those who joined themselves to Israel. Now the people of God are made up of people from every tribe and language and nation who have joined themselves to Christ. Jesus has made a new humanity, his body the Church. The Church is not an ethnic nation living in a particular geographic location. It crosses ethnic and national boundaries. It is not a political kingdom in that sense.

What this means is that no nation-state can be identified as God's people or the kingdom of God. They are to be judged as the kingdoms of this world. None of them, not Israel, not the US, gets to have a moral free pass on how they wage war or treat other nations and peoples. I am certainly not convinced that Israel's actions in Gaza are limited and restrained. And unlike Esther, the language from the far right in the Israeli cabinet is that they do want to lay hands upon the plunder of Palestinian land.

We have lived under a relative peace and stability ushered in by the post second world war international rules based order underpinned by the US military. Conflicts between nations have been far away from us. There has been for the last 80 years at least an on paper commitment by many nations to the international rule of law. Those commitments and that stability seems to be unravelling. We can expect to see more conflict that comes closer to home, and in which it is not clear where justice is to be found, who is right and who is wrong. And so we will have to grapple with the imperfect moral complexities of war.

Now I'm under no illusions that this not so brief sermon adequately deals with this question. And we can keep exploring in question time. But let me finish with this. Our discomfort with a text like Esther 8-9 is of the same species as our disappointments with the partial justice we see in this world. And both point to our longing for a day when justice and peace will kiss (Psalm 85.10). That day will come when the Prince of peace returns, and every knee will bow and every tongue confess he is Lord. And so we pray for grace to love our neighbours, even our enemies. We pray for our governments to maintain justice. We pray for nations not to seek for war, but to work for peace. And we pray Come Lord Jesus, come.