

## The last shall be first (The upside down kingdom)

### Series: Esther

Date: 29 June 2025

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Esther 6-7, 1 Corinthians 1.18-32, Luke 1.46-55

When I was studying theology one of my classmates did a paper on comedy, and God's sense of humour. Often comedy highlights the absurdities of being human. We notice character flaws and how they show that the wise and powerful are not as wise or as powerful as they think they are. Sometimes the Bible can be seen as dry and humourless. But I hope that you've got a little sense of the humour of the Bible, even God's own sense of humour as you've read Esther. In Esther chapters 6-7 the comedy is in full swing. As we enjoy Haman's downfall playing out, I want to suggest we also get a window into how the Gospel, the Good News of God's work throughout history, but most especially seen in the death and resurrection of his Son, the Lord Jesus.

Before we dive in, a confession. William came up to me after last week's sermon and asked, "Why do you keep saying there are 8 chapters in Esther? There's 10!" There's nothing like your kids pointing out your mistakes. So my apologies for selling Esther short!

Chapter 6 opens with king Xerxes being unable to sleep. He orders that the record of his own reign be read to him. There's an irony that he's so conceited that he wants to hear a story about himself, but we wonder if it's so boring that it will put him to sleep. It just so happens (one of those divine coincidences we looked at last week), that the story read to him is about when Mordecai warned him of an assassination plot. He asks, "What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" None. Ok, so righting this wrong is the first item of business for that morning. But, as always, the king is in need of advice. Who better to give it than his right hand man Haman?!

Meanwhile Haman has come with his own plan in mind - impaling Mordecai. But before he can speak, the king asks him, "What should be done for the man king delights to honour?" Haman thinks to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?" It's an echo of Haman's own boasting back in chapter 5 about his vast wealth, his many sons, all the ways that the king has honoured him, how he has been *elevated* above all the other nobles, and even invited to an exclusive banquet by queen Esther.

How would *I* like to be honoured? Haman thinks. So he answers, "For the man the king delights to honor, **8** have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. **9** Then let the robe and horse be entrusted

to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

It's an echo of the story of Joseph who was made the right hand man of Pharaoh in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> But where Joseph was given power in order to save the people of Egypt and other nations, here Haman is taking the power and the glory for himself. We as readers have been wondering what is going on with Esther's banquets? How is Haman's plan to annihilate the Jews going to be thwarted? And now the tables are turned. The king says, "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate." And just to rub salt into the wound, "Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

What Haman thought was his moment of triumph, the moment where his own power and glory would be displayed, becomes the moment of his humiliation. In his pride he's shown to be a fool. And even then there is an irony. There's no suggestion in the text that anyone else would have thought any less of Haman for simply carrying out the king's command and honouring Mordecai. His humiliation is all in his own mind. Except for the fact that he had boasted to his friends and family. And when they find out, they abandon him in dread.

His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!"

Again, this is one of those moments where there seems to be a deliberate absence where we might expect God to be named. Zeresh and his friends realise Haman has not only set himself against Mordecai and his people, but also their God. Who else could bring about such a comic reversal of fortunes?

Before he can catch his breath, Haman is rushed away to Esther's second banquet. His last supper. My guess is that he has lost his appetite. The king again asks Esther what her request is. And now she reveals the plot.

If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. **4** For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.

Who would dare threaten his beautiful wife and her people?

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 41.41-43

“Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

6 Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”

We know the king is a man of extreme emotions. He storms off in a murderous rage. Haman now knows the only person who can save his life is Esther, so he throws himself before her. But again with exquisite comic timing, the king returns just at that moment and instead of seeing Haman begging for mercy he thinks he's trying to have his way with the queen. Before Esther has a chance to speak, Haman is seized.

Now a eunuch tells Xerxes more of Haman's plot. Haman has set up a pole for Mordecai, “who spoke up to help the king”. “The king said, “Impale him on it!” 10 So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai.”

It's a black comedy at this point, but the humour is still there. The tables have turned. The joke is on Haman. The evil he has planned has come back on his own head. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare gave us the phrase “hoisted on his own petard.” He could well have borrowed from Esther and said, “impaled on his own pole”. Haman's own boast has come true in the most gruesome fashion, he has been elevated above all the nobles of Persia, 50 cubits or 23 metres above them, to be exact.

I began by saying that we see in Haman's downfall a picture of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus. That might seem like an outlandish claim, but stick with me. Earlier this year we looked at some of the different pictures the New Testament uses to explain what God has accomplished through the death of Christ on the cross. One of these is the theme of victory. The cross, to all those watching, looked like weakness, humiliation and defeat. Rather than being God's conquering anointed king, Jesus instead dies the humiliating death of a slave, stripped naked, lifted high for all to see. It looked like the triumph of evil. But what looked like defeat was in fact God's great victory of the powers of Satan, sin, and death. And so Paul writes in Colossians, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”<sup>2</sup>

We see this same pattern of that divine judo move, victory through seeming defeat, in Esther. The text emphasises it. Haman set up a pole to impale Mordecai. And that pole gets mentioned 3 times at the end of chapter 7. It was meant for Mordecai's defeat and humiliation, but Haman's own pole becomes the instrument of his own death and humiliation. The word translated pole is the same word which Paul uses when he quotes

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2.15

Deuteronomy 21.23, “Cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say Christ has redeemed us from the curse of sin because he was cursed for us, by hanging on the tree.

But back to Esther, did you notice how Esther named Haman back in 7.6, “An adversary and enemy”. There’s no article in the Hebrew, and for my money I think what is implied is “the”, not “an”. The adversary and enemy. This is how the apostle Peter describes Satan.<sup>4</sup> In Haman we see the great and enduring enemy of God at work to destroy his people, and to thwart his plans to save the world. But in Haman’s defeat we catch a glimpse of the tree by which one day God will win the ultimate victory of our Adversary through his Son, so that the tree of death becomes for us the tree of life. The work of the snake is overthrown. It is the ultimate moment of divine reversal, the supreme joke played on the devil.

Victory through defeat, strength through weakness. This is how God always works. This is the upside down kingdom of God. God is in the business of turning upside down our values and expectations. Here’s how St Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians:

**18** For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... **22** Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

It’s what Mary sang when she heard she would give birth to the Messiah,  
     He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
     but has lifted up the humble.

If that’s not a great description of Esther 6-7, I don’t know what is!

But this is not just how God is at work in the world to bring about his purposes. It also shapes how we’re to live in God’s kingdom. Right before talking about resist the Adversary, St Peter writes,

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,  
     “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

**6** Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **7** Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3.13

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 5.8

Haman was brought down by his own pride. God's people are to be marked by humility. There is nothing more humble, and more powerful than prayer. It is an expression of our utter dependence upon God, and yet at the same time a confidence that the one who is All-mighty will act.

St Paul goes on to show how the upside down nature of the cross shapes the Christian community.

**26** Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. **28** God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, **29** so that no one may boast before him. **30** It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. **31** Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

This is what the church looks like worldwide. It's not made up of influencers or politicians or intellectuals or billionaires. It's made up of very ordinary people, getting on with the business of loving God and loving their neighbours. I'm conscious of Paul's words for us as St George's, given we are in the wealthiest part of Tasmania, with the Parliament, the Supreme Court, the CSIRO, all close by. My hope and prayer is that we do reach people who are leaders in government, and law and science and business and so on, so that they can, like Esther, act to bring God's light and life and peace in their spheres of influence. But the greatest barrier for such folk is that they are somebodies, not nobodies! On the other hand, you might feel like a nobody, like you're small and weak and unimportant. Well you are exactly the kind of person that God is in the business of working through. This is what Esther was. A young woman. A member of an ethnic minority in a foreign land. An orphan. A nobody. God chooses the weak things of this world to shame the strong, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are.

I think about this with our Morning Prayer team. Some of the people have joined this group because of their weaknesses. Well, my vision is that this group would be the strength of St George's - because in our weakness we turn to the God whose strength is at work in weakness and we ask him to act. It's the most powerful thing we can do.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1.26-31

And all of this, God's divine comedy, victory through defeat, strength through weakness, is all that we might boast, not like Haman, in himself, but that we might boast in the Lord. To him alone be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations. Amen.