

For such a time as this

THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

It has been described as more of a melodrama than biblical history. It has been likened to a soap opera rather than what we would expect to read in a book of the bible. It's a story of strong ambitious men, beautiful intelligent women, groups vying for power and control. There are death threats, huge risks taken, genocide, ethnic cleansing, self-sacrifice, evil forces and good triumphing in the end. There are characters who reflect greed, power, prejudices and arrogance. There are characters who manipulate and oppress others to massage their fragile vanity. There are others of integrity and dignity, who have courage and are honest. There are those who take risks for what matters, who are self-effacing and modest.

It is the story of women who are groomed for a whole year in order to be good enough for a night with the king! It is the story of a queen who is chosen purely for her beauty. It is the story of women having no say in their destinies, being used as playthings by their masters. It is the story of evil Haman. It is the story of astonishing Mordecai.

It is a story, the events of which took place in the land of Persia (modern day Iran) in the years 486-465BC. King Xeres, son of Darius III is on the throne. He ruled over a huge empire stretching from India to Egypt and as far south as Ethiopia, as far west as the eastern Mediterranean.

He ruled with absolute power – no-one could question him. He could order anything and his every command would be carried out. No-one could even enter his presence unless invited and if they did, they risked punishment of death. If the king so chose, he could extend his golden scepter and accept an interruption, the only hope of survival!

Some scholars question the validity of the story of Esther, some question its historical basis in fact. Some question its validity since it's the only old testament book not found among the Dead Sea scrolls. Some question its theological value saying it's "an uninviting wilderness" in contrast to the rest of the inspiring text of the Old Testament. Perhaps in some ways most challenging of all, and something you may have noticed yourself, Esther is the only book in the bible that does not mention God at all!

It is possible, as some do, to make effective counter arguments to criticisms about it's historical accuracy and the like, but a book in the bible that makes no mention of God....? Some scholars find it hard to see the purpose of the story of Esther. But maybe they missed it...precisely in the fact that God is not mentioned! You could argue that the book of Esther is an intensely secular book because it is set in the court of an intensely secular king where God is never mentioned, and you would be right.

Where do you spend most of your time? Most of us spend most of our time in a secular environment. That's where, in truth, we live and work. How many times a day is God mentioned in your workplace? In how many places you go would God be considered important or relevant, or have any direct influence on what was happening? Maybe the whole point of Esther's story, and the main reason we have it preserved for us in the bible, is precisely because it speaks to people who live and work in an secular community, where most of the time God is never mentioned. Maybe the biggest challenge of this story is that it hangs very loosely to what would be considered devoutly religious and pious works that we tend to think of as "spiritual."

Esther and Mordecai lived in an empire that did not acknowledge God – certainly not the way we know him. How many of us live and work in communities of which the same could be said? How many of us I wonder might even go as far as to describe the communities in which we live, work and spend a good deal of our time as godless places? How should we live as Christians in such circumstances? Is it even possible to find God in the midst of circumstances that make no

mention of God, and where values are different and belief is in nothing or anything?

Is it possible to see the extraordinary hand of God in the ordinary world most of us inhabit daily? Is God at work in the mess? It is to see the answers to these kinds of questions that Esther is given to us.

Our vision statement says: By 2015 we will naturally be radical followers of Christ; caught up in him; enjoying each other; transforming communities...And then some!

Radical followers of Christ: what does it mean to be radical? Queen Vashti was radical in her response to Xerxes to come to his banquet. He wanted her to parade her beauty before all his nobles; she refused! To be radical is sometimes to be uncompromising - to stand against. Sometimes radical followers of Christ choose to stand against the culture and society for the glory of God. Esther chose a different kind of radical. She worked within a corrupt and godless society, winning friends and influencing people while never losing her vision of God or her humility. It was from a position within the system that God used Esther to save his people. Had she chosen to stand against the system, she would never have had the opportunity in taking the risks she did. She became queen and found herself right where God needed her "for such a time as this!" Through her radical response, this ordinary girl became a channel of grace through which God worked the extraordinary. So the question is: how about you?

Sometimes we might be called to stand against, but most of the time God works his extraordinary grace in and through ordinary people who choose to be radical followers of Christ

"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴ When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

⁶ So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

⁹ Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions. (Esther 4 v 1 – 17)

Friends we are about to celebrate the completion of the church redevelopment project. Some 20 years ago or so, there was need combined with vision and we embarked on a journey that would take us all the way to where we are today. That journey involved decisions that would affect many of us quite dramatically.

We had to make decisions about what kind of building we wanted: what were our hopes and dreams for the future? Who did we want this building to be for, just those already here, or those in the community beyond? We had to ask the questions how much would it cost and how would we be able to pay? And friends, I see similarities in our journey and the story of Esther!

You see, I firmly believe that we were here for such a time as this. We were the ones in this community at this time who had to take risks if we were going to be radical followers of Christ. Esther was where God had placed her but she had to step out in faith. We were in the place God had called us, but we had to take a huge step of faith. Esther's words were: "and if I perish, I perish!" I understand that, at least a little!

Friends, the truth it seems to me is this: most of us here, at the start of our journey and as it continued, were not, and are not, people in great places of power and influence or vastly wealthy. But when we took what God had given us, and chose to give sacrificially, he was able to take that and bless it and in his grace bring glory to God. Ordinary people in ordinary jobs, doing ordinary things in an ordinary church... but living as radical followers. What we did was countercultural: we gave generously, we chose to invest in the kingdom of God rather than be tethered to the earth. We chose to believe that as we stepped out in faith God would meet us along the way. We chose to leave the safety of the boat and take up the invitation to walk on the water. We chose to adopt a "whatever it takes!" attitude to the redevelopment of a building because we could see that it was far, far more than that!

We have chosen over the last 20 years or so to stay true to that vision and God in his grace has blessed us. And you know what blows me away the most in all this? It is that God seems most often to want to use ordinary people like you and me in whatever it is he's doing! God used Esther, a young Jewish girl who's parents died when she was young, Esther's cousin Mordecai, who had taken her in because she had no parents, for such a time as this! God used his people here, living counter to the culture ready to take the leap of faith.

Graham Poole – for such a time as this, able to manage the building side of things, Joe Lansdell – for such a time as this, with others to help with the financial side of things. Les Bennett – for such a time as this, with others on the 29:11 team to help us raise the money in creative ways. As an aside – I only play golf today because of the redevelopment project! Trevor organized golf days as a way of raising money and eventually I went to one to show my support... and somehow got hooked!

Friends, here's the point: just as Esther and Mordecai lived in a godless society and didn't stand against it to achieve glory for God, so can we! We did it over the 20 years or so of the redevelopment project by working hard, giving generously and sacrificially and staying true to the vision. And friends, we can do it now! We have this wonderful building. Pray friends that it will be used for the glory of God! Pray for those who come in week by week who as yet have no knowledge of a saviour. Pray that as we live out the values of the kingdom of God in this place, others will see that love wins!

Friends, we still have the opportunity to work hard, to give generously and sacrificially in and through this building. So how about you? For such a time as this?

Friends, perhaps the most important thing the book of Esther gives us is an insight into the truth that God is always at work in the mess. God is at work in and through the lives of ordinary people ready to do his extraordinary thing, even in the most secular communities and in the most godless places, and maybe God has got you just where he wants you...for such a time as this!

And your response...what will it be? Will you echo Esther's radical response.... "and if I perish, I perish!" I know that I want to be a radical follower of Christ ... How about you?

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 2nd September 2012, by Rev. Ian Phillips.