**20th January 2008**

**Esther 4. 6-16**

It is the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death so to keep you awake and amused I’ll be dropping in some of his famous lines throughout this sermon. In Twelfth Night he wrote: "Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them". - (Twelfth Night Act II, Scene V).

The Queen has just celebrated her 90th birthday. She was born great but she has also done a great job of being Queen. Whether you are a royalist or a republican, most people will be united in their respect and admiration for the role she has performed. She has served her country with dignity and grace, with the minimum of fuss and the minimum of controversy. For all that we are grateful.

When you take on such a role there is a huge capacity for putting your foot in it, for upsetting people, causing diplomatic faux pas and international incidences. She could have regarded the world as her oyster (*Why, then the world 's mine oyster" - (The Merry Wives of Windsor Act II, Scene II).)* and reigned with arrogance and a lack of humility. But she has been remarkable in her discipline and resolve not to meddle or make a mess and to know that she is not worthy of the throne but by chance of birth she has taken on the role of monarch.

Just recently Prince William and Kate were involved in a diplomatic incident in Bhutan. They were given the opportunity to take part in the popular national sport of archery.

The couple appeared hugely entertained by a group of female cheerleaders who were singing songs to put off their opponents. It was only afterwards that an official revealed they had been 'singing obscenities'.

[The Sun Newspaper can be relied upon to provide a translation](http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/7074776/Wills-gets-ribbed-by-archery-fans-in-Bhutan.html) of what the duke termed "good distraction songs". According to the paper the Bhutanese sang "you're bald, you've got a big nose, we hope your private parts are as big, and that your arrows will fall short".

Our Bible reading is also about a Queen. Except this Queen is a little bit more racy and bawdy and definitely meddles in politics.

I’ve chosen a biblical reading from only one of two books in the Bible named after a woman. In the Book of Esther we find two incredible women who showed great courage in different ways. They show that "True nobility is exempt from fear". - (Henry VI Part 2 Act IV, Scene I).

Last time I preached on the Book of Daniel and I suggested that the book drew on ancient stories from the time the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon but was probably written up during the second century BC at a time when the Greek influenced King; Antiochus Epiphanies was trying to destroy the Jewish way of life. The Book of Esther which we are looking at today recalls another attempt to destroy the Jewish People.

Let me tell you the story briefly and then I’ll draw some thoughts to reflect on. "An honest tale speeds best, being plainly told". - (Richard III Act IV, Scene IV).

The Persians have conquered Babylon. In 481 BC Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in the Bible) comes to the throne of Babylon. He has a wild party and under the influence of much wine he demands that his wife, Queen Vashti comes and shows off her beauty to all the Royal Court. But Vashti has a mind of her own and won’t be treated as an object, the king’s possession. "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall". - (Measure for measure Act II, Scene I).

The king is non plussed and is advised to dismiss his queen and so protect his image and safeguard male domination. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown". - (Henry IV Part 2 Act III, Scene I).

The decision is made to choose a new queen to replace Vashti. They organise a massive beauty contest. Many girls are brought into a harem and they all take turns in going to see the king. When the bible uses the euphemism ‘to go to someone’ it usually means to have sex. If you were part of the harem and you were called to the King’s bedroom in the evening, it usually wasn’t to play cards! When it comes to Esther’s turn she charms the king and wins his favour. She is made the new queen, but what the Persian King Ahasuerus doesn’t know is that she is Jewish. "The course of true love never did run smooth". - (A Midsummer’s night’s dream Act I, Scene I).

Her uncle Mordecai discovers a plot to assassinate the king. As a result some Persian nobles fall from favour and the King appoints Haman, a foreigner, as his prime minister. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to him and acknowledge his status (There 's daggers in men's smiles".) - (Macbeth Act II, Scene III).

Haman sets out to use his power to destroy the Jews completely.

Haman accuses the Jews of disobeying the laws of Persia and obtains the king’s consent to kill them all. He is a superstitious man and casts lots and chooses an auspicious day for slaughter. (Purim is the word for lots in the Assyrian language – hence the name of the Jewish festival that celebrates their deliverance in this story.)

Mordecai tells Esther about the plot and asks her to tell the king. But there is a difficulty. Anyone who appears before the King without being summoned by him risked the death penalty unless the king extended his golden sceptre. Eventually Esther agrees and asks all Jews to fast for three days on her behalf.

The better part of valour is discretion". - (Henry IV Part 1 Act V, Scene IV). So Esther, dressed in her most royal garb, enters the king’s presence. He extends his golden sceptre to her and enquired what she wanted. She invites the king and Haman to a banquet. Haman leaves the banquet full of his own importance but on his way home sees Mordecai. This fills him with anger. Haman’s wife advises him to build a gallows on which to hang Mordecai.

That night, the king can’t sleep. He asks his servants to read to him from the court chronicles. In them, the king discovers that Mordecai has never been rewarded for saving him from the plot to assassinate him. When Haman appears at court, the king asks him ‘what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to reward?’ Haman thinking that it was he and not Mordecai who was to be rewarded, says that the man to be honoured should be dressed in royal clothing, ride upon the royal horse and be led through the city streets by a herald. The king then tells Haman to arrange this for Mordecai.

At a second banquet, Esther reveals to the king the plot to destroy the Jews and that she herself is a Jew. "Having nothing, nothing can she lose".- (Henry VI Part 3 Act III, Scene III).

The king then orders Haman’s execution and elevates Mordecai to a position of influence. The story ends with the Jews having the right to protect themselves and take revenge on any who threaten them.

A few comments to reflect on the meaning of the story of Esther for us today.

In many ways it is the story of two women. Queen Vashti refuses to comply with the kings demands to display her beauty before all his drunken party guests. She stands firm on her right as a woman, not to be treated as an object, the king’s possession. The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on". - (Henry IV Part 3 Act II, Scene II).

Wealth, privilege and power can go to your head and the king thought he owned the world and everyone in it and can treat people as he likes. Even with great wealth and privilege and power you should still treat people with respect. No doubt money talks and has great influence and many people are willing to sell themselves short but Vashti wasn’t one of them and she stood her ground in a subversive act. She defended her honour and protected her self respect.

If we are in relationships with others where we are taken for granted, or treated as possessions, objects to be used, whose feelings and opinions are disregarded, then maybe its time to do a Vashti and stand up for who we are and our own self-respect.

But this is the book of Esther and Esther dominates the story. Unlike Vashti she complies with the desires of the king. Many feminist commentators criticise Esther for being a negative stereotype of womanhood. She plays the man’s game – she uses her physical beauty and sexual attraction to win her influence. She has no choice but to conform to custom and obey the king’s will. She is a realist and acting within the structures of a very male dominated society of her time wins, not for herself but for her people, their salvation.

Vashti and Esther are heroines in their own right for each defied oppressive power in the interests of higher morality. Vashti disobeyed, refusing to come to the king when summoned to his presence. Esther disobeyed, daring to come to the king’s presence when uninvited. But one was demoted for her disobedience, the other rewarded. Esther was ready to put her life on the line, not like Vashti for her own honour and self respect, but on behalf of others, for the lives of her people.

Humanly speaking at this point Esther is in complete control, no longer passive and meekly accepting the demeaning conventions of the society she found herself in. She makes her choice ‘If I perish, I perish’.

Mordecai had pleaded with her to ask the king for mercy. ‘Who knows’ he says ‘whether it is not for a time like this that you have become queen?’ Behind Mordecai's question lies the hint of a deeper purpose – the call to a greater good, the call to a greater cause than just your own self respect and honour.

Most people want to get on in life and be as successful as they can with the gifts and talents that they have. There is nothing wrong in that. But there is likely to come a time when the opportunities will arise to work for a greater good and not just the good of yourself. I believe God will be prompting you with the same words of Mordecai ‘is it not for a time like this that you are where you are?’

Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them"

God doesn’t get a mention in the Book of Esther. Many people can live life today without referring to God and there is great debate in our society as to whether God exists, and if God does exist does God have any involvement in our history. The Christian faith and the Jewish faith have always believed that God has been behind history. Yet some scholars believe that Esther was written at a time when perhaps because of jaded secularism the Jews believed that God was absent and that they were on their own. History was an entirely human enterprise where it is the Jews and not the God of the Jews who make the decisive differences. If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me". - (Macbeth Act I, Scene III)

Yet in the story there are remarkable coincidences and reversals. Esther being in the right place at the right time; the king not being able to sleep and reading the chronicles and realising that Mordecai should be honoured, thus saving his life.

However, remarkable coincidences and dramatic reversals do not in and of themselves demonstrate that God is behind them. God is totally veiled in this book. The author intends to convey total uncertainty about the presence of God.

One could conclude that Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." - (Macbeth Act V, Scene V). But one could also see that hand of God in events.

So one commentator writes that “By refusing to exclude either possibility, the author conveys his belief that there can be no definitive knowledge of the working of God’s hand in history. This does not necessarily equate with skepticism. Rather, it encourages the willingness to face history with an openness to the possibility of providence … Such a stance is a stance of profound faith”

*You have to see with the eyes of faith.*

I am reminded of the quote by Archbishop William Temple who said that when he prayed coincidences happened and when he stopped praying coincidences stopped happening.

There was a courageous affirmation of faith in an inscription found on a cellar wall in Cologne where Jews had been hiding from the Nazis:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining

I believe in love even when feeling it not.

I believe in God even when he is silent.

I believe God is still at work, God’s hand is on history, and God’s hand rests on our shoulders and at certain times will nudge us and call us to serve a higher cause and a greater good than just ourselves. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on". The tempest

We don’t have to go looking for it – God usually comes looking for us and will nudge us ‘is it not for a time like this that you are where you are?’