

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Esther: 'The Hidden Hand of God'

The Book of Esther is a fantastic story. Unusually for a bible text, God's name is never used directly, and yet God's hand is across all the pages, pulling the strings when his people need him most. Roughly a contemporary of Daniel, Esther has much wisdom to tell us about how to thrive in a different or even hostile culture. It's also a rattling good yarn, which we'll enjoy for the next two weeks or so!

Day 1 – Esther 1:1-22 'Pride and prejudice'

So the book begins with a bang! Like an ancient Bond movie, we start stylishly in the palaces of the powerful, where the King (Xerxes) has convened a big summit which lasts almost six months (v4). King Xerxes came to power in approx 486 BC, so, as we begin in the third year of his reign (v3), this dates the book fairly accurately to about 483 BC.

The summit ends with a whole week of feasting, at which Xerxes' power and wealth is ostentatiously displayed (verses 5-8). At this time, the Medo-Persian empire stretched from India to Egypt, so Xerxes was probably the most powerful ruler in the world.

But there was one person over which Xerxes had less than full control. His wife, Queen Vashti, had her own banquet (v9), and when she was summoned by the king, she refused to come (v12). We don't know why: there is no sign that she was plotting, perhaps she was just tired of being treated like an object for display. Whatever the reason, her refusal was like a red rag to the bullish king, who, after consulting his advisors, decided that she could no longer be queen.

The real reason why we are told this somewhat unedifying episode is made clear in chapter 2. Vashti's successor is Esther, the heroine of our story, so were it not for Xerxes' actions here in chapter 1, there would be no Esther, and who knows what might have happened to God's people as a result?

But Vashti's fate reminds us of the destructive power of pride and insecurity. Above all, Xerxes could not bear to lose face: his veneer of absolute control could not be dented. Was there really any great risk to the family structures of the kingdom by Vashti's assertion of independence? Probably not. Just a lot of paranoid alpha males worried about their reputations (vv17-18)!

There is a useful reminder for us here. Where does our sense of worth and security come from? Certainly there is great value in affirmation from other humans; in contrast, abusive or neglectful relationships can destroy our self-esteem. But ultimately, our security comes from knowing whose we are: that we are loved and cherished by God, that we are unique and uniquely valuable: held in his arms and given hope, purpose and a future.

All of us will occasionally be 'disrespected' by someone. God's constant love and affirmation allows us to rise above that. It may not heal all of our human relationships, but it does allow us to live with confidence and trust. Perhaps even today there may be some encounter God is calling us to let go of?

As we begin Esther – and as we begin this week – let's take a few moments to remind ourselves Whose we are. The Lord is our shepherd: we shall not want.

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Day 2 – Esther 2:1-18 'The Cinderella Moment'

After Xerxes' major strop in chapter 1, today our now queen-less king is looking for a new partner. Not that he lacks existing possibilities, as the frequent references to his harem indicate. However, he misses that special someone, and so institutes a nationwide beauty competition, which to our modern eyes reads rather like an ancient combination of Miss World and Love Island.

Not surprisingly, the competition attracts hundreds of hopeful applicants (v8), who have to undergo a gruelling beauty regime (v12) to have any chance of winning the king's attention. The competition lasts months and months, with only one entrant allowed to visit the king each evening (v14).

One prospective candidate, however, is different to the others. There are definite parallels between Esther and the much better-known story of Cinderella. Both have a more illustrious heritage than their current circumstances suggest: generally the Babylonians only took into exile the brightest and the best of the conquered Jewish nation, so Mordecai probably has a respectable ancestry, which accounts for his being able to sit at the king's gate regularly, as we'll see tomorrow.

Both also have to hide their background. Esther is not mistreated, as Cinderella was, but her Jewish faith and culture potentially puts her at risk. She has to enter the king's harem incognito, as it were, just like the way Cinderella goes to the prince's ball – though it is notable that the narrator indicates that it was the older Mordecai who forbade Esther to reveal her background, rather than Esther having any such qualms herself.

Finally, both Esther and Cinderella have that natural grace and beauty that enables them to stand out from all the other wannabes. It is interesting that Esther refuses more than the basic beauty regimen before seeing the king (v15) – you get the sense that she wants the king to see her (and love her) as she really is, or not at all. Perhaps it is this integrity and authenticity – allied to her obvious beauty – that the king falls in love with, such that Esther becomes the chosen one, the new Queen. Fittingly, the king throws another banquet, completed successfully without the dramas of chapter 1.

We may not have Esther's beauty, nor any desire to win a pageant! But there is something here about the value of honesty and authenticity which is worth reflecting on. How easy do we find it to let others see us as we are? Esther finds herself in an ambivalent position: forced to hide her culture (rather than her faith) but open about her character. It strikes a chord with many of us, who understand the struggle to be 'real' in our world and our relationships.

God blessed Esther despite all of this. May Esther's example inspire us to be authentic, and, where we find it hard to share parts of ourselves to others, to ask God for courage to be real about who we are, including our faith.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Esther: 'The Hidden Hand of God'

Day 3 – Esther 2:19-23 'Sense and sensibility'

Our culture has an ambiguous relationship to truth-telling when it involves getting other people into trouble. Generally it depends on how much power the culprit has. If they are powerful, then the person telling the truth is lauded as a whistle-blower. If they are peers, then the person telling the truth is a snitch.

Should power really determine the judgement we give? Arguably the risk of 'snitching' is greater than whistle-blowing, where (at least in the West) the person usually has immediate protection under the law. And Mordecai no doubt took a certain level of risk in revealing today's plot, since people prepared to kill a king are almost certainly able to kill a private citizen.

The story at this stage is only recounted briefly: it might seem odd that it is even recounted at all, given the lack of attention the narrator seems to give it here – however its true importance only becomes clear later in the book. Mordecai has saved the king's life, even if, for now, little is said about it.

Why did I give today's inspiration the title I did? Well, the original meaning of 'sensibility' when Jane Austen wrote this famous title is what we would now describe as 'sensitivity' – and this is an apt description of Mordecai, who throughout the book of Esther demonstrates admirable sensitivity, both in emotional and intellectual terms. Unwilling to leave Esther destitute as an orphan, he raises her as his own (2:7). He is acutely worried about Esther's racial background (2:10, repeated here in this passage v20). And now he spots a plot which perhaps others would have overlooked. Mordecai is someone who we would call 'tuned in' on every level.

But unlike the 'sensible' (i.e. 'sensitive') sister in Austen's novel, Mordecai shows sense as well. He tells Esther, who in turn tells the king. Esther also sensibly (and humbly) gives Mordecai credit – this fact again becomes incredibly important in a couple of chapters' time. Our narrator is setting up the story with expert care.

Some of us may have faced the sort of dilemma Mordecai did – whether to blow a whistle or not. Others of us have not: either way, truth-telling tempered with humility, as it is here with Esther and Mordecai, is a wonderful quality. The world needs more of it: and may God grant us grace to be humble truth-tellers in our lives, too.

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Day 4 – Esther 3:1-15 'The Purge'

How quickly the tide turns. Only yesterday, Mordecai is saving the king's life: today, not only his life is in danger but that of his people. How did we get here?

Things start to go wrong when Haman is promoted to the highest office in the land, below only the king. Haman is an Agagite (v1), which means there's a bitter history here. Agag was the king which the prophet Samuel told King Saul to defeat – but Saul wouldn't kill him, so Samuel finished the job. Ever since, the Agagites had hated the Jews, so Haman's promotion always threatened to mean trouble for the Jewish exiles living in the Medo-Persian empire, and especially in its capital, Susa.

The flashpoint is not quite what it seems. The text says that Mordecai refused to pay Haman honour (v2), so it looks like a gratuitous snub. But what is really being required of Mordecai here is a form of worship, where Haman is effectively the substitute for King Xerxes himself. What Mordecai is doing (or refusing to do) is the same as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the famous story in Daniel chapter 3. His worship is reserved for God alone – he will not bow down to another human being.

It is hard to know whether Haman was genuinely personally outraged by Mordecai's decision, or just used it as a convenient excuse to exact a plan of vengeance which had lain dormant in the hearts of his people for centuries. Either way, he set about making the most of his privileged position to sanction a genocide.

As we saw in chapter 1, Xerxes was particularly sensitive to anything that smacked of disrespect (like most tyrants), and Haman cleverly plays this to his advantage. So he tells the king: the Jewish people 'keep themselves separate, and they do not obey the king's laws.' (v8) So, with the promise of a huge bribe, he suggests that the king should destroy them.

The king isn't interested in the money (v11), but he doesn't like the sound of disobedience, so he concurs, and issues the decree – giving a full 11 months for the letters to be circulated, and plans for the genocide to be prepared. Time enough, also, for God – via Mordecai and Esther – to save the day! But that's for tomorrow, and the next few days.

(An interesting footnote is that the genocide was planned for the 13th day of the month (v13), which is where the original idea of 'unlucky thirteen' comes from. It is also notable to see how both power and hatred reduces our capacity for compassion – see how Xerxes and Haman enjoy a drink (v15) while the city is in a fever of anxiety.)

What we see in today's passage is the destructive power of resentment and bitterness in the human heart. Haman had nursed a hatred for the Jewish people in all probability for many years, even generations. This hatred was ultimately to be his undoing. Whilst we might think that this could never happen now, sadly history suggests otherwise. Let us continue to examine our own hearts, and also pray for the hearts of those with power in our world today.

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Day 5 – Esther 4:1-17 (i) 'Sliding doors'

I wonder what it must be like to know that one moment will determine the entire course of your life? In the classic film of 20 years ago which is our title for today, we saw two versions of what happened to Gwyneth Paltrow's life depending on one trivial incident: the doors of a tube train were shutting, and she either squeezed into the carriage or just missed it. The repercussions of this one event then played out – in alternative versions – for the rest of the film.

Today's passage is a bit like this – only the big difference is that the event is not random or trivial, but huge and obvious. Esther's people are threatened with genocide, and she is the only one of her people with favour and access to the king, the one person whose intervention might prove critical – this is the moment that will determine the course of her life, one way or another.

But to do so is hugely risky. We've already see how touchy King Xerxes is, and how keen on observing both royal prestige and protocol. Even his wives were not allowed just to turn up and see him, and, if Esther times it wrong or meets his displeasure, she faces a worse fate than her predecessor Queen Vashti, who was 'merely' banished – Esther would be executed. (v11)

And yet... and yet: 'who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?' (v14) In one famous sentence Mordecai gets to the heart of the issue. Esther may have wondered why she, of all people, was favoured by the king: perhaps this is the answer, perhaps this is her calling, her moment?

And it's important to notice that Mordecai attests that, for all that she is in the right place at the right time, Esther is not the messiah, to coin a phrase: God is not limited to only being able to fix this via Esther: if she refuses, Mordecai recognises (in one of the great statements of faith) that God could do it another way, because God is the one true God. Esther is called to be obedient, and let God do the rest.

For such a time as this.... very few of us will experience the sort of nation-changing life-defining moment Esther did. But this sense of calling applies to us, too. Calling is not just for ministers and missionaries: God calls all of us to lots of things, big and small. What is God's call for *you*, at such a time as this? It might be a person to contact, or a commitment to make, a task to fulfil, or a relationship to renew. It might be something bigger! But whatever it is, will you step out, like Esther did, trusting in the One who calls?

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Day 6 – Esther 4:1-17 (ii) 'The Fast Show'

This chapter of Esther is usually the only one that anyone has read! So for that reason at least, it deserves a second look. And, alongside the conversation between Esther and Mordecai, what is most striking in this chapter is how the situation caused a nation to fast and pray.

Yes, their lives were at stake – but even so, the outpouring of religious fervour and commitment is notable. People sought their Lord, and not only with prayer but with fasting, too. We see it in verse 3, and then again at the end of the chapter (v16).

The most recent equivalent in the history of our nation came in 1940, as 300,000 British and Allied troops were encircled in a small corner of North-Eastern France near Dunkirk and facing annihilation. On 23rd May, King George VI called for a national day of prayer and fasting for the following Sunday. 10 days later, the result was a miraculous rescue of 270,000 of these soldiers from the beach at Dunkirk. The weather conditions were unusually favourable and the German response, unusually muted.

Watching the recent, brilliant film about Dunkirk, this part of the narrative was completely overlooked. Perhaps that's no surprise – but it should never be forgotten. A nation fasted – and hundreds of thousands of lives were saved. Just as it was here in the book of Esther.

Fasting is an ancient spiritual discipline which has declined in recent generations. It is fascinating that 'fast days' are now much more likely to be talked about in diet regimens than in church! And I would admit that my own commitment to fasting has been patchy for a long time, so I don't speak with any great authority today.

But this passage does challenge me to look again. We may not be facing genocide, as the Jewish people of Esther's day did – but there are huge challenges facing our church, nation and world at present. Fasting is not a slot machine, and it's always a challenge: but it does unlock something in the spiritual realm, in our access to God. **It's hard to think about that with Christmas around the corner! But perhaps in the coming Lent – if not before – it's time to take another look?**

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Day 7 – Esther 5:1-10 'True grit'

'Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you.' I was told that many years ago, and it's wise advice. There may be times when we have to rely on the 'action' of others, but often we have to play our part as an outworking of what we have prayed for.

For three days, the Jewish people have fasted and prayed. Now it is time to act. And it is notable that Esther wastes no time. As soon as the period of fasting is completed, she takes her courage in both hands, puts on her best dress and goes to see the king.

And we should bear in mind that *this* is the riskiest moment for Esther. It's now that the king will either order her execution or extend his favour towards her. Thankfully, absence in this case has made the king's heart grow fonder, and Esther is warmly received, with the further promise that the king will grant her whatever she asks.

But even now, Esther plays a canny game. Rather than blurt out her request – too much too soon, with the additional drawback that Haman is not in the room to see the king's response – she invites Xerxes and Haman to a banquet that evening, thereby keeping the king on tenterhooks and making sure that Haman is fully involved in everything that happens next. The banquet is a success, but even then Esther keeps her cards close to her chest and piques the king's interest yet more by inviting him to another banquet the following evening, to which Haman is also invited.

Esther is not just being coy or cowardly: little by little she is reeling the king in. After two meetings in quick succession Xerxes must be wondering what on earth could be so important, whilst also being reminded of how much he likes his new queen. As it happens, Mordecai also plays his part by showing his own courage in the face of Haman's malice (v9). This prompts Haman to say and do some unwise things which ultimately work against him, as we'll see tomorrow.

Today's passage finishes with apparently everything left unresolved: but in many respects the biggest battle has been won. Esther has an audience with the king, and God's people have hope. Hundreds of years later, Jesus counselled us to be 'wise as snakes and innocent as doves'. We should beware becoming 'political animals' – but there are times when shrewd behaviour reaps its reward.

May God grant us grace to act wisely in all that we face this week.

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Day 8 – Esther 5:9-14 'Dumb and dumber'

In his book *Why Organisations Fail*, Jim Collins – the leading management and leadership thinker – outlines five stages of decline. Fascinatingly, the first two stages happen when organisations appear to be at the peak of their powers: stage 1 is 'hubris born of success' and stage 2 is 'undisciplined pursuit of more.' What makes this sequence so devastating is that the rug is slowly being pulled from under their feet even while the organisation is lauding its own achievements. Usually, by the time people start to realise they're in trouble (stage 3 – denial of risk or peril) it's too late. They didn't spot the warning signs, and disaster lies ahead.

What's true of organisations can be equally true of people. Haman finds himself exactly in the sort of quietly perilous position that Collins describes in his book – though to read today's passage you would never know. Haman exhibits exactly that brand of hubris that is the undoing of many powerful and successful people. He assumes that his position is unassailable, and fails to heed the warning signs that a more astute observer might have spotted. He knows full well that Mordecai is a Jew – so how has he missed the obvious inference as to the likely sympathies of Mordecai's ward, the Queen, the very person now throwing banquets for the king and himself?

Instead, he spends his time boasting about his power (dumb?) and, notwithstanding the king's existing statute to oppress the Jewish people, decides that Mordecai deserves humiliation on top of execution, demanding the construction of a 75 foot pole on which to hang his body (dumber?!).

Haman will come to have a particular reason to regret wasting his energies on building this pole – but it is a sobering reminder that human pride, power and ambition are shifting sands on which to build a life. The methods people use to force their way to the top usually come back to bite them, often with greater force.

Our Saviour models another way. The way of humility and service, of compassion and generosity. This Saviour's arrival lay hundreds of years ahead of this particular story, but we can see echoes of this kind of lifestyle in the behaviour of Mordecai and Esther. They chose to be salt and light, to be the good yeast that worked its way through the dough. Many of Jesus' parables of the kingdom seem to connect with 'the mustard seed conspiracy' of these two, which saved a nation.

Tempting as it is to misuse power, may God grant us grace to choose the kingdom lifestyle taught and lived by Jesus, trusting in God's power and authority to bless it – and us.

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Day 9 – Esther 6:1-14 'The Sting'

'When I pray, coincidences happen more often.' These well-known words of Archbishop William Temple form a fitting introduction to today's reading. God isn't mentioned anywhere in this chapter, but we do see a remarkable sequence of coincidences:

Coincidence 1: the king happens not to be able to sleep.

Coincidence 2: of all the remedies he might have chosen, he decides that the best cure for insomnia is to have the history of his reign read out to him.

Coincidence 3: we don't know how long this reading of records lasted, but either way, it went on long enough to include the episode where Mordecai saves his life.

Coincidence 4: Xerxes decides that now is the time to ask whether this chap had been rewarded for his service.

Coincidence 5: Haman just happens to be arriving at court as this conversation is ending.

Coincidence 6: Xerxes fails to mention Mordecai by name when speaking with Haman (though we might admit that Xerxes is more aware of Haman's hatred of Mordecai than he lets on).

Coincidence 7: Haman, still in hubristic mode, thinks the king's question is about him, so awards himself (he supposes) the highest accolades and rewards.

...and as a result of all these 'coincidences' Haman now finds himself, not executing Mordecai, but publicly honouring him! Can you imagine the scene as Haman of all people is forced to parade Mordecai around the streets, praising his deeds, and secretly grinding his teeth all the while?!

Today of all days is where we see the hidden hand of God, which gave us the title for this series. But God has been at work throughout: in providing a dedicated father figure for Esther, in Esther's success in becoming queen, in Mordecai foiling a plot but not being rewarded at the time – had he been, the events in this chapter could not have happened as they did. In all this, God appeared to be silent but was in fact pulling all the strings.

It is hard at any point in time to be sure of how the Lord is at work: for much of life we see 'through a glass darkly'. However, this marvellous story reminds us that God *is* there, he *is* at work, and sometimes we get to look through the window into the throne room of heaven and perceive it.

The story is not yet done, but everything is now in place, and we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Wherever you find yourself in this season, what 'coincidences' will you pray for today?

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Day 10 – Esther 7:1-10 'The Reckoning'

Every great story has a climactic scene where the drama is played out, and the central characters all find themselves in the room together. Although the most important outcome of the drama happens in the next two chapters, in chapter 7 we get the long-awaited dramatic climax, delivered to perfection by the master story-teller of Esther.

All the pieces are now in place: in chapter 4, Mordecai gave Esther her mission, which she chose to accept. In chapter 5, Esther won the king's favour and Haman allowed the pride and malice of his heart to rule his head. In chapter 6, the king honours Mordecai and unwittingly humiliates Haman.

Now – and only now – comes the decisive second banquet thrown by Queen Esther, and here we can finally appreciate the wisdom of playing the long game. By not pestering the king, there has been time for the tables to turn in Esther's favour, and the king – who likes to be flattered and given the appearance of control in every situation – is fully won over, and willing to grant her anything.

But even at this point, Esther is wise: she phrases her request in both humble and personal terms: the king has not just agreed to kill a whole people – the king has agreed to kill her, his queen; her people would accept slavery because of their love for the king – but genocide is a step too far!

It is the perfect response, and Xerxes now realises that he has been manipulated into a foolish decision by his senior advisor. How could he possibly execute this people, one of whom is his queen and another of whom has proved his loyalty by exposing a plot and saving his life?

Haman knows the game is up: but in a final, darkly comic episode he slips while throwing himself on Esther's mercy and appears to be making an inappropriate advance to the queen just as her husband walks in. With heavy irony he is now impaled on the pole he set up for Mordecai.

I said yesterday that God is nowhere directly named in this story. But there is a beautiful twist. The letters which spell God's name appear five times in the Hebrew text: once in chapter 1, but then crucially twice in chapter 5 and twice more here in chapter 7: in verses 5 and 7, when judgement is declared against Haman.

Like the acrostic poems of the psalms, these letters begin sequential words and to a Hebrew speaker would be noticeable. It is, if you like, a simple code for God's people to notice as this story is told, and to inspire them to give thanks that God has been helping and protecting them all along. Bearing in mind that most of Esther's readers would have been living far away from Israel in secular cultures, what better way to give them quiet and enduring hope?

May we, too, as we read, hear God's simple code to us, written between the lines of every page: I love you, I am there for you, I will be with you. And may that give us, too, quiet and enduring hope.

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Day 11 – Esther 8:1-19 'The Great Escape'

Intentions are one thing, actual plans and outcomes another. Over the last few days we've seen how God – with the aid of Mordecai, Esther and some outrageous 'coincidences' – has brought about the promise of rescue for his people. This is absolutely incredible! The king's mind has changed and he is now ready to intervene on Esther's behalf – but the key question now is: *how* will it actually come about?

As it stands, even with Haman gone, there's still a law in effect which decrees the destruction of the Jews in a few months' time; and, as Xerxes himself says in today's passage, 'no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.' (v8) The danger remains very real. Promises and good intentions need to become reality.

Again, we have to pay tribute to Queen Esther's wisdom. Knowing that the existing law is still in effect, she asks her husband if he will write a new law to counteract the current one. And the irrevocable nature of Persian laws (regardless of their merit) explains why the law is written as it is. At first sight, giving the Jewish people freedom to arm and defend themselves sounds like asking for trouble: but it is the best response to a legally binding decree which invites violence against them. Anyone sensible reading this new edict would realise that the king is effectively banning the genocide, so would be daft to try and attack the Jewish people against the will of the king. But just in case anyone does....

It's a clever solution to a potentially disastrous problem, and the king further cranks up the formidable machinery of his government to make sure the details of this law are spread as widely as possible. His empire covers a vast area of territory, so it's just as well he can utilise his secretaries, satraps and couriers to get the word out.

It's a helpful reminder that even miraculous deliverances often need practical human activity on the ground. The miraculous deliverance at Dunkirk we mentioned a few days ago still needed hundreds of sailors crewing their boats across the channel. Administration is listed as a spiritual gift in the New Testament for good reason: practical wisdom and skill doesn't replace God's guiding hand, but complements it.

How might this encourage you today? Wherever God is at work, may he equip you with the practical skills and energy you need to work alongside his divine initiative.

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Day 12 – Esther 9:1-19 'Independence Day'

This passage might have made challenging reading for you. To our modern ears the exultant response to the wave of violence strikes a discordant note, and perhaps dilutes the sense of relief we feel at the way God's people were saved.

As always, we have to judge events by the standards of the time, in which this kind of outcome was not especially unusual. But it's also worth reminding ourselves of what was shared yesterday. The edict of the King was effectively designed to stop anyone attacking the Jewish people. And yet still many had gathered who were 'determined to destroy them' (v2). This left the Jews with no choice but to fight back: which they did very successfully. Such action would not have been necessary if the implications of king's edict had been received by all people as they should have been.

That's not to justify violence for its own sake: but this was a vulnerable minority used to being despised and ill-treated – and who had lived for nearly a year with the threat of destruction hanging over them. Their very existence was at stake.

For all that, we may have preferred an ending which involved deliverance without bloodshed, and it reminds us why the good news of the gospel has such transformative power. Jesus modelled a different way, which has impacted our culture more profoundly than we often realise. Today, followers of Jesus are encouraged to leave vengeance to God, the true Judge of all (Romans 12:19).

This is never easy, as it requires us to curb our natural instincts. But for all who suffer unjustly, may God grant us grace to hold them in prayer, and trust him to take care of the rest. And if that unjust suffering is yours, may God be especially close to you today, and bind your wounds.

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Day 13 – Esther 9:19-28 'The Holiday'

In our culture, November is our season of remembrance. Beginning with All Saints' Day, moving through Bonfire Night and Remembrance Sunday and (if you're American) finishing with Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November, we dedicate a period of the year specially to remembering significant events.

And, for all that these occasions remember vastly different things, there are common threads for each. There is thankfulness: for our worldwide church (or particular loved ones), for deliverance from a wicked plot, for the ending of war, for the birth of a national identity. There is also a message to take to heart, which serves to strengthen our resolve to live as better people and better communities.

These occasions also call to mind our vulnerabilities. We think of the Suffering Church, of what might have happened if our government had been destroyed, of the millions whose lives were changed (or ended) by war, and perhaps who live with its ongoing consequences.

All these themes resonate with our passage today. To celebrate their great deliverance a new festival is decreed for the Jewish people: Purim. It's still celebrated today – **the date for 2022 is a 24-hour period from the evening of Wed 16th March until the evening of Thursday 17th March**. It is primarily a day (originally two days) of 'feasting and joy' as the text declares (v22).

And yet there is also an underlying message of watchfulness: this has happened before, it can happen again. It is traditional to read the story of Esther (known to Jews as 'The Megillah') as part of the Purim celebrations, and tragically, the events of the mid-20th century have been a heartbreaking reminder that this kind of threat is not just ancient history.

It is also notable that, amidst the celebrations, gifts should be given to the poor (v22). To know our own vulnerability inevitably makes us more aware of others'.

Remembering is an important business. I have said in other places that *our memory is our identity*. It shapes our thinking, not just of the past, but of our present and future. Take a moment today to remember something that makes you thankful, and opens your heart ever more to others.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Esther: 'The Hidden Hand of God'

Day 14 – Esther 9:29-10:3 'Last Orders'

And so our tale comes to an end. After the storms of the preceding chapters, the story concludes with relative calm, as Queen Esther communicates the decree regarding the new festival of Purim throughout the empire and Mordecai takes on a Daniel/Joseph type role as the king's senior adviser.

It is notable that the book begins with Xerxes running the show directly, and ends with Esther and Mordecai taking more of the reins on his behalf – Xerxes was still ruler, of course, but now he had people he could trust around him (at least for a season), and it's a tangible sign of the favour that God has shown both to his people and to these two remarkable individuals that we end up here.

In this last segment we get lovely summaries of each of the main characters. Xerxes – whose name means 'ruling over heroes' – 'imposed tribute' (v1). He is still a tyrant, albeit perhaps a more benevolent one than he was a few months previously. Mordecai 'worked for the good of his people' (v3) – a fitting assessment of this quiet giant. And Esther 'wrote with full authority' (v29). During the course of the story she has visibly grown in stature, displaying great qualities of wisdom and courage, and she now acts like a true queen – with confidence and authority.

I hope over the last couple of weeks that this amazing episode has inspired you in various ways. Throughout we've seen the hidden hand of God, at work in the world and through his people. But this is not (yet) a 'happy ever after' tale. Life remained, and remains, challenging for God's people. God's people remained a vulnerable minority then, and many find themselves in similar situations now. To live as followers of Jesus calls us to swim against the tide, which means our relationship with culture and power will have pressure points. We are not called to seek trouble for its own sake – but sometimes it finds us anyway.

However, the phrase which describes the decree Queen Esther sends across the empire provides a fitting conclusion to this series: 'words of goodwill and assurance' (v30). This is the purpose of the book of Esther: to remind us of God's favour towards us, his people, and to give us confidence and hope as a result.

Hundreds of years later, angels across the night sky over Bethlehem declared the same blessing as a baby was born: 'peace and goodwill to all'. **As we wait for our Saviour's coming over the next few weeks**, may we be filled again with hope and joy at these words of goodwill and assurance. Amen.