



## Scenes from the Old Testament

### The Banquet of Esther and Ahasuerus

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*Esther 4 Luke 1: 46–56*

Jan Victors (1619–76), *The Banquet of Esther and Ahasuerus* (1640s),  
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel (WGA25059)<sup>1</sup>

It is a pleasure to be with you. Thank you for the invitation to preach, and the patience you have exercised as it has been over a year since that invitation was received. I was due to be with you about this time last year but, as you may be aware, circumstances changed quite dramatically for me at that time and for a while my diary was overtaken. I am so glad to be with you now.

I am pleased that I was invited before I became something of a novelty. I've been ordained over 20 years, training in Durham at Cranmer Hall (having been an undergraduate at 'the other place' where one of our chaplains was a certain Michael Banner). I've been a parish priest, a chaplain, a training officer and worked in vocation and training. I've job-shared, worked part-time, full time, taken extended parental leave. I'd been on the senior management team in my Diocese, had national role for women clergy, and participated in the House of Bishops. But before I was appointed Bishop of Stockport no-one outside the church, and really very few within the church except those I'd worked with directly, knew who I was. I was on no-one's list of those women who might become the first female bishop in the Church of England.

(There were such lists, among those who like to speculate on these things within the church, published in the papers as the legislation was being debating, and with odds offered at William Hill and other bookmakers – so if you had a bet on one of the others with a higher profile, and I lost you money, I'm sorry!)

So, as unexpected as my appointment was for me, it was even more so for everyone else. And that has meant I've been asked a lot, "why you?" It's not an unreasonable question. And the answer is most certainly not because I'm the best. I don't think I'm exceptional even. The occasion was extraordinary but that doesn't mean I am.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan\\_Victors\\_-\\_The\\_Banquet\\_of\\_Esther\\_and\\_Ahasuerus\\_-\\_WGA25059.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Victors_-_The_Banquet_of_Esther_and_Ahasuerus_-_WGA25059.jpg)

So, why me, why now? While I might speak of vocation, and others might reflect on a theology of predestination, the reality is, I think, more prosaic: I happened to be the right enough person at the right time and in the right place when the appointment needed to be made of a new Bishop of Stockport. And being the first was just scheduling. There were a number of episcopal vacancies, and the process of my appointment happened more swiftly than, say, the appointment of the Bishop of Hull (who was the second woman to be appointed Bishop in the Church of England – the wonderful Alison White, who had timing be otherwise might well have been the first).

Which brings me to the book of Esther. Esther has become something of a refrain through this first year of my episcopate. It is an interesting book in the Bible – one of only two named for a woman (the other being the book of Ruth).

Here is a brief summary of the plot for those who may not be familiar with it (though I recommend you read it – it is only 10 short chapters and the plot has more twists and turns than a Dan Brown novel): Esther an orphaned Jewish young woman, one of many 'beautiful young virgins' brought to the palace of King of Persia to be considered as replacement for Queen Vashti who had displeased the King. Esther was chosen, and drew the approval of the King, and so when one of the royal advisers plotted to exterminate the Jews because of a personal slight, Esther found herself in a position where perhaps she alone could save them. As her adoptive guardian said, 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'

So, it is not so much that I turned to Esther as a role model, but that her story, too, is told around this critical moment, when attention and expectation gathers about her as an individual in an unique position 'for such a time as this'. That is a phrase that has been quoted at me, offered to me, held over me. The implication being that I have been placed in this honoured position for a reason – and what am I going to do about it? Just to be clear, I don't think I am the queen, and (though I am conscious of some of the wildly unrealistic expectations around my appointment and my ability to transform the church, and the nation) I don't think I am the saviour of my people.

And, there is much of Esther's story about which I am deeply uneasy. There are ambiguities, to put it mildly, about Esther's moment of truth. There are aspects of her stories that are offensive, and difficult to read both as human history and salvation history. Esther's intervention changed the balance of power but did not shape the exercise of power. I find particularly difficult both the circumstances that brought her to that moment (which can be read to constitute a kind of groomed trafficking, with the compliance of her male guardian, which landed her in sexual slavery, albeit with the trappings of luxury) and the outcome of her moment (personal courage in risking facing the volatile, despotic King, with a wisdom that led to the reversal of circumstance, so her people were saved and their aggressor defeated), which was delivered though a personalised, vengeful execution and the kind of widespread slaughter that we condemn today.

It was not news to me, when I was appointed bishop, that I am a woman. I was selected and began training for ordination before the church passed legislation for women to be priests. I was among the first therefore to be selected, trained and ordained in parallel with their male peers. Inevitably that has meant that I have often been the first woman to hold many of the roles I've been appointed to. But I didn't think of myself as a woman. I was a priest, a curate, a chaplain, a vicar, rather than a woman priest, a lady vicar,

and so on. However I have come to understand that my profile as a 'first woman' matters, to many men as well as women, partly because we are still a novelty. Whatever my misgivings about the content, therefore, I do think it matters that the books of Esther and Ruth get attention.

There are other women in the Bible, of course, but we often have to work hard to see and hear them. We are all diminished by the overlooking, and implied disregard, of the contribution of women in every sphere of life. So I am pleased that my undergraduate college has recognised that they do not have a single portrait of a woman on public display and have commissioned two – one of me and one of Professor Christine Greenhalgh, their first woman Fellow. I felt embarrassed about it initially, and anxious that history may have a less flattering (though perhaps in the end more accurate) assessment of me, but I've come to terms with it because it is not about me really, but my embodying the contribution and aspiration of others. (Trinity, by my casual observation, seems a little ahead – you do have some women saints in your windows and Katherine Parr and Queen Mary Tudor in Hall, a statue of Elizabeth I – perhaps that is sufficient if women have made no further contribution to be recognised or honoured in the 500 years since?)

It is not only that women are seen, but how we are seen, that matters.

I chose this Jan Victors painting of Esther, not because I like it particularly, nor because it is necessarily a particularly fine piece of art. Indeed it is strangely domestic, I think. It depicts the moment when Queen Esther identifies Haman as her enemy, the one who has plotted to destroy her and her people. Esther and Ahasuerus, in this painting, look, perhaps, more like comfortable burghers in a boundary dispute with their neighbour than rulers of one hundred and twenty seven provinces in a deadly genocidal conflict. But it was the only painting I could find of this story in which Esther doesn't look either like one seduced (or seducing), or as if she is about to have an attack of the vapours. In Victors' painting, at least, Esther looks rooted and secure, and in charge of this moment. She is the centre of attention and an equal of the men. It may not be great art but it communicates something valuable.

I recoil at some of the outcomes in the book of Esther, but I honour her. 'For such a time as [that]' she was as faithful as she knew how. That is Esther's legacy, her name, and voice, and image; being recognised for her contribution, and, whatever her failings, limitations and restraints, being allowed to inform and inspire.

We do not know what Esther thought as she prepared to take up the responsibility she had acquired. Perhaps Esther knew and prayed the words of Hannah – which so clearly also shape Mary's prayerful response to her own unexpected, uncontrollable circumstances (which we know as the Magnificat). Perhaps Esther's self-understanding was also as a hand-maiden to Yahweh, a servant of God before she was a slave to Ahasuerus.

You may have noticed that this sermon, like the book of Esther, thus far has made no mention of God. That, I think, is the most extraordinary aspect of the book of Esther. I do not think God is absent from its chapters, indeed God seems to me silently woven into its entire fabric. But God is not named, the specific places that God is at work are not identified, God's intentions and conclusions are not spelled out.

I think this book is a gift precisely because it does not predetermine our discernment of God. We are not told what God wanted, who God is working with, what God is hoping for, how God feels about people or events. Faced with new circumstances, extraordinary opportunities and threats, and no definitive interpreter of God's way, Esther made the best choices she could. In the midst of dislocation, trauma, violence and fear somehow God is present. In this instance God's people are saved, though at a terrible cost for others. At other times God's people have suffered.

Our faith is that God was most present in absence, as Jesus was slain for us on the cross. It is because God is sometimes hidden that I continue to believe. I can only make sense of that which is senseless by being unable to discern clearly where God is, but holding on none the less. In the words written on a concentration camp wall, 'I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent.'

Let us pray.

In the words of the Common Worship collect for today:

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.