Sermon for 26th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

i

Some people find Esther rather unpalatable because they dislike the notion of Haman getting his comeuppance on the gallows he has prepared for Mordecai, Esther’s guardian. It offends our modern delicacies, but we didn’t refrain from celebrating the similar end of another disreputable character, Mussolini, when he was strung up in Milan.

We sometimes forget that the Bible tells us how it is; often the Word of God holds up a mirror to us and we don’t like what we see. The *Book of Psalms* is a particularly clear mirror in which we see our human face – warts and all. So we may feel squeamish about Haman’s death, but we need to remember that most of us did not hold back our relief when Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi got their just deserts. There are probably a few notorious names you could add to that list that you are still hoping to come a similar cropper.

That’s the truth about us and it always has been however painful we find it to admit. Those who have directly suffered under despotic and cruel regimes know what a blessed relief it can be when their persecutor meets an untimely end. In many instances, they do not hesitate to thank God for it, either.

Esther tells the story of how Esther manages to thwart the genocide of her people being planned by Haman. Many Persians who were to help Haman in the extermination of the Jews also lose their lives in a short conflict with the Jewish people, once the Jews are allowed to arm themselves. If we don’t mourn the death of Hitler and the war against the Nazi regime, it is difficult to see why we would have sympathy for Haman.

The salutary lesson of *Esther* should be that any nationality, or any individual can choose to play the role of Haman and any nation or individual can be forced into the role of victim. It is alarmingly easy to forget what it was like to be the victim once we get the upper hand or have had a privileged and easy passage, but nasty people are at work all over the world and nasty people have a habit of meeting a nasty end.

ii

Those who have compiled our lectionary readings today have deliberately chosen the last part of James 5 rather than its earlier part because commending the power of prayer is a more palatable and preach-able passage than what precedes it. But the opening part of James 5 sets the context for the bit we heard read this morning.

Chapter 5 opens with a warning to evil employers who have failed to pay their workers and inflicted murder on innocent third parties who just got in their way and who were not even directly contending against them (vv1-6). Jesus is their judge, they are warned, and stands at the door, so James urges believers to be patient in the sense that they should not take matters into their own hands and risk perpetrating evil themselves, but should leave it to Jesus who is poised to bring retribution upon the wicked (vv7-9).

These verses remind us that the image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking to be allowed in is not a completely comforting image – much depends on what sort of life has been led behind the door of our heart and what Jesus will find when he steps inside. In Revelation 3:20, the repentant are urged to open their heart to Jesus in faith with the promise that Jesus will come in and ‘eat with him’. I don’t think that is what is foreseen for the unrepentant wicked in James 5.

So be patient, urges James, do not let your frustration goad you into taking evil action yourselves, nor provoke you into turning on one another; use your patient suffering as a witness to your trust in Christ. Part of that trust evidently is not just confidence that Christ will assuage all pain and bring the believer safely through suffering and even death itself, but also a belief that ultimately Jesus will deal with the wicked. People who have lived comfortable lives and been spared the pain of oppression may overlook this aspect too readily.

iii

Discerning who the wicked are and where opposition lies is the subject of our gospel reading today. The disciples have seen people healing the sick who do not belong to them. Should they oppose such people?

Jesus urges an open and generous attitude to the good works of others: “Who is not against us is for us” (v40).

This may appear in contradiction to Matthew 12:30 when Jesus said, “Who is not for me is against me.” The contexts of the two sayings reveal that they are the two sides of the same coin.

In Matthew 12 the Pharisees have just witnessed Jesus heal a deaf and mute man, but instead of having the open-minded attitude Jesus commends to his disciples in Mark 9:40, they wish to attribute the good work of Jesus to the devil. They oppose goodness and holiness by anyone who does not strictly belong to their group.

Thus they put themselves in league with Satan. Healing and goodness are from God wherever they are found, by whatever religious faith. Everyone is invited to be “for Jesus” at least to the degree of acknowledging the good works he has done, even if you do not believe him to be your Saviour. If they are not for goodness, in whatever guise it appears, then they are for Satan.

So when Jesus’ disciples enquire whether they should have a similar attitude to that of the Pharisees and oppose those they see healing when they do not belong to their group, Jesus says they must have an open-minded attitude.

Some churches operate with a closed-minded, pharisaic attitude and will only work alongside those who clearly belong to their brand of faith, but all main stream churches operate on the open-minded principle that wherever they can find people of good intent they will happily work alongside them, despite them not belonging to the Christian fold.

Wesley certainly had such an open-minded attitude, notwithstanding his fervent evangelical faith. In his *Notes on the New Testament,* Wesley writes of this verse:

“…to confine religion to them that follow us is a narrowness of spirit which we should avoid and abhor.”

We are urged to be open-minded to accept the good intentions of those who may not espouse our faith. Goodness is goodness whether practised by those with another faith or those without any.

Since goodness is to be recognised wherever it is found, Jesus will acknowledge the simplest act of kindness to the least of his followers, such as the offering of a cup of water (v41).

However, evil is evil too wherever that is found and Jesus will also take note of any wicked behaviour which results in the least of his followers losing their faith. Using traditional imagery, it would be better for such a person if he were thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck.

The passage from Mark closes with verses that warn against the idea that taking an open view to recognise goodness as goodness wherever you find it, is tantamount to compromising with evil. Jesus is calling for his followers to have an open-minded attitude to others, but not thereby join them in their lack of faith. Jesus is still calling his followers to retain their distinctiveness in faith and morals – for if salt loses its saltiness it serves no useful purpose and is thrown away.

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