

Christianity 101

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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Gracious God,

Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

Our Sunday readings sometimes appear a bit obscure because we only get them in snatches. I experienced this (yet again) earlier this week when I tried to make sense of our first lesson. It's been twenty years since my last OT class and, truth be told, I'd forgotten the main points of the narrative. So I did some research (that is, I read the Book of Esther) and here's what I learned:

Esther is a fair Jewish maiden who lives with her uncle, Mordecai, in the capitol city of Persia. The king of Persia, Ahaseurus, throws a wild bash for his subjects. This is a seven-day affair – here's a description: "There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired."

Under the influence of multiple adult beverages, Ahaseurus calls out for Queen Vashti to join the party – she's beautiful and he wants to show her off. She declines. This embarrasses the king and terrifies the men at the party; what if word gets out and other women begin to act independently? To nip that possibility in the bud, Vashti is relieved of her position and the search for a new queen begins.

Esther wins the contest after, get this, a year of beauty treatments – six months of oil of myrrh and six months of cosmetics. Ahaseurus is delighted by her but doesn't appear to be too interested in her personal history or her spiritual autobiography. Shortly after her elevation to the throne, Mordecai, sitting at the royal gate, gets wind of an assassination plot against the king. He immediately reveals the details and Ahaseurus is saved. A new character now steps onto the stage: Haman is elevated in rank to take the place of the traitors. But Haman has an ego problem; it drives him crazy when Mordecai consistently refuses to bow down before him – Jews reserve this honor for God alone.

Haman attempts to persuade the king to eliminate the Jews throughout his kingdom because of their unwillingness to offer obeisance. The king agrees, not knowing that Mordecai saved his life or that Queen Esther is Jewish. The date for the massacre is set – the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. The Jews are

terrified, Mordecai dons sackcloth and ashes, and Esther is inveighed upon to dissuade the king. So, quickly adapting to the ways of the court, Esther throws yet another party (sounds like our Stewardship Committee) and invites both the king and Haman. This second wing-ding is a two day affair. On the night between the king sleeps fitfully; he finally gives up and asks that the royal record be brought in and read to him. He thereby discovers that Mordecai saved his life and, the next day, charges Haman with the task of bestowing honors on his champion. Haman carries out his duties but is made all the more furious by it.

And all that brings us to this morning's reading. The king and Haman arrive at the party. Esther reveals her Jewish identity to the king and begs for mercy for her people. The king then turns on Haman and sends him to the very gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai. With the king's permission, the Jews in the kingdom rise up and smite those who intended them harm; the memory of all this is established in the celebration of Purim, the Jewish feast.

So that's the back-story. Knowing that helps us make sense of the gospel this morning, especially this haunting line: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." The moral, and the link with the Book of Esther, are clear: God is working the divine purpose out; anyone who intends to move against that for selfish reasons will not fare well. All who are thus inclined should quickly recall the fate of Haman and do everything in their power to rein in self-destructive desires – the hyperbolic language about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes conveys the seriousness of the issue. God through Christ is creating the Alternative Empire – unremitting joy, shared power, shared prosperity, swords into plowshares, eternal enemies at peace; anything that rebels against that vision – hatred, turmoil, abuse, greed, violence – must be quickly excised and left behind.

That, I think is a fair reading of our text. It all sounds a bit harsh to us today – we like our religion to come in softer packaging – but that's probably how the people who originally received the gospel sussed out the meaning. A few demented literalists in church history failed to understand the true purpose of the colorful imagery that Jesus uses today and did grievous harm to themselves. That is both terribly sad and willfully perverse, the very opposite of Christ's intention. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly; his teaching today simply counsels us to brusquely remove all that sabotages or compromises or undermines the fullness of life that God intends for each of us and for all of us.

And that brings us to this morning's epistle and, thankfully, back inside our comfort zone (no more stories about gallows or amputation). This is a pastoral word to the infant church. Are any suffering? Teach them to pray. Are any cheerful? Encourage songs of praise. Are any sick? Pray over them and anoint them. Remember to confess. Are any wandering from the truth? Bring them back. This is Christianity 101, the basics.

It would be easy to overlook this simple lesson, especially as the others today are so much more dramatic. But aren't these the very things that most frequently move against the abundant life that Jesus promises. I'm not really too worried about the likes of Haman anymore (although, in point of fact, genocidal egomaniacs still exist and need to be vigorously resisted). But, again, I'm not really worried about Haman. I'm more concerned with existential discomfort, with the insecurity that comes with illness, with the self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure, with being false to myself and others, with spiritual forgetfulness. These are usually the things that offend my soul and the souls of those who confide in me.

So we bring this homily to a close now by attending more carefully to the elementary wisdom revealed in the Epistle of James. We return to the basics of Christian spiritual practice. We do this because we desire fullness of life. We want to be happy in the deepest sense of that word. We instinctively know that the path to happiness must necessarily include prayer, praise, active concern for others, the confession and healing of sin, and steady spiritual focus. And we know that even this, perfectly offered, won't deliver us. When we've done all that we can to access the power and grace of God through the daily implementation of these ancient practices, we return to our Source and echo the psalmist: "Our help is in the Name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." May we ask for and trust that help in the week to come. Amen.