

Sermon for 30th September 2018. Esther 7. 1-6;9-10;9.20-22. Psalm 24. James 5.12-20. Mark 9.38-50.

This morning our scripture readings begin with the book of Esther. In today's passage, we hear something of the story of how two wise and courageous Jews, Mordecai and Queen Esther, aided by God, foil the genocidal schemes of Haman, who is known as "the enemy of the Jews".

In the story we hear how the tables are turned on Haman, who had plotted to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom, simply because the Jewish leader Mordecai did not bow down to him. Esther who had become queen turned the king's mind in favour of Mordecai and the Jews and the gallows that had been built for Mordecai became the place of Haman's demise.

Esther is a narrative that expresses well known themes of Old Testament Wisdom Literature that refer to the Jewish diaspora community, that is, those Jews who have been forced through persecution to flee their original homeland for safer lands.

The story is concerned with the painful and urgent problem of how to be a faithful Jew in a foreign environment. One common solution to this problem, had been the creation of Jewish enclaves or ghettos, in which the faithful could be insulated against the pagan world while fervently nourishing a very explicit piety.

The book of Esther however, puts forth a very different approach. It claims that the Jews must participate in the affairs of state; they must appreciate the good elements in non-Jewish society and co-operate wherever possible; and grounded in their faith beliefs they must take some responsibility for their own wellbeing.

This is a very different approach to living a sheltered insulated life awaiting God to provide a miraculous solution to their problem. In the book God is represented as a faithful deity - and Esther as a mature holistic character. She is someone who remains faithful to her religious beliefs while her gifts of diplomacy and trust, win the day.

The book has a slow moving storyline in which change seems to take a considerable amount of time, and this itself reflects the patience and persistence needed by the Jews as they strive to be true to their calling in difficult circumstances in foreign lands. The story of Esther provides a broader view of the way of faith, rather than an enclosed one – which was the tendency in the exilic period of the Jewish diaspora.

In today's gospel story from Mark there is, I believe, a parallel meaning. The passage relates the story of the man casting out demons in Jesus name, and how the disciples tried to stop him because he was not a follower. Jesus response to the man, is one of tolerance.

Jesus makes the point that people can only do miracles in his name if there is some connection- some relationship to him. The use of Jesus name was not simply some magical formula as the disciples may have thought – there was a deeper connection than that.

The tolerance shown by Jesus in this story, is thought to have been used to criticize tendencies toward exclusivism and cliquishness in the early church. Jesus 'words in this passage rebuke all blind exclusiveness, or arrogant assumptions that God's action in the world is itself insular or limited, and not fulfilled in many different ways in the world.

Jesus response to the disciple's complaint about the exorcist, shifts the emphasis from a focus on the person to a focus on the activity he was involved in. *For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.* Jesus says.

Causing others to sin, by keeping them out through the exclusivity of their group, is what will do the damage to people – and it is this that the disciples should be concerned about above all else. “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 mill stone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea”.

The little ones here are thought to be those who had just come to faith. Jesus words infer that the disciples are to be aware of their own actions and take responsibility for them instead of pointing the finger at others. Jesus calls his disciples to concentrate on their own actions by cultivating holiness inclusiveness, love and hospitality in their lives, in order to be mature in themselves and thus witness effectively to others.

I believe the scripture stories today speaks into our own era with great relevance.

This is a time in our society when Christians are in a minority – current statistics tell us that – the decline of attendance in church has been dramatically on the down for decades and the recent revelations of sexual abuse by some clergy members has cemented many peoples view of us who are the church, as untrustworthy and misguided.

This is a time when we may feel a foreigner in our own land. We might even see this era as the time of our own diaspora - our own scattering. Yet we are not to become insular or isolated in our society. And we may recall the positive story of Esther at this time.

We are not to build fences around our faith to keep ourselves in and others out, but rather we are to be aware of our own actions, keeping close to our hearts the way of our faith as Christians in terms of holiness, love, hospitality, inclusivity and as James teaches us in the epistle today, truthfulness, prayerfulness and forgiveness.

We are to live in the security of the one whose name our faith is grounded – Christ our Lord, for it is our actions in our faith that will influence the society around us. And I am happy to say that we at Grovely parish in many ways do this. We boldly proclaim our intended activities wherever we can particularly on the notice board at All Saints, and this lets people know what we are up to and at the same time invites the wider community to join us.

Our trivia nights invite all in the wider community to join in – and they do. Riverfire at St Matthews is another example– many come to enjoy the view from the church grounds.

Our plans to employ a youth minister that are presently in motion, seek to include the youth from the wider community. The all-embracing welcome of our new web site goes some way to keep up with the technology of the time and inform the wider community what is available here and what we plan.

Grounded in our faith and turning ourselves outward towards the community in which we live, is our mission in this day and age. My prayer for each one of us therefore, is that we will all continue to come in to the wholeness of faith in the Risen One, and in great joy and freedom share with one another in the peace of Christ - in our own church circles -and beyond in the wider community.

The Lord be with you.