

St George's Epsom  
31 October 2021  
Zoom Service

### **FOR A TIME SUCH AS THIS? (Esther 4:14, Galatians 5:22-23)**

It's only in hindsight that we realise we've just had the last summer swim of the season and it will be a very long time before we are back in the water.

We did not know it at the time, but in many ways the equivalent of our glorious summer finished on the evening of Tuesday 17 August with the announcement of a COVID delta case in the community:

- Until that point we felt we had somehow escaped the vicissitudes of COVID
- We were a team of 5 million showing the rest of the world how with kindness and resolve we could save lives, beat the virus and largely pick up where we left off before
- We agreed that the virus was the enemy and not people
- Maybe we were a little bit smug as we got on with our lives while the rest of the world experienced soaring mortality and repeated lockdowns, but hey we were showing the world how to do it.
- We were punching well beyond our weight.
- We were proud to call ourselves New Zealanders.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> August, we have been faced with a series of uncomfortable questions that as a society, enjoying the long summer, we have seldom had to think about:

- What does it mean to love my neighbour when I strongly disagree with them?
- Should my rights be constrained by the needs of the most vulnerable in society?
- Am I my brother's/sister's keeper – where does individual choice end and collective action begin?

- How do we do church when we can't even be together?
- What does it mean in our current context to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's.

Time will tell whether 17 August was the end of a summer season, or indeed the end of a post war consensus that stretched all the way back to 1945 and meant that for most of us who grew up in NZ we were the luckiest of all generations.

No wonder we are feeling anxious. We are grieving an ambiguous loss and given the nature of our loss we have reason to be anxious:

- Don't know what we have lost – sneaking suspicion it might be quite a lot
- Uncertain where we are in the choreography of the disaster
- We know things will have changed, but we are not sure by how much and how it will affect me and those I love
- Paralysed with information and don't know who to trust anymore

Creating a 'holy uncertainty':

- recognition that we were never in control in the first place, that we never were masters of our own universe.
- There is no right/wrong solution – best we can hope for is to muddle along somewhat inelegantly, accepting there is no answer that does not come without a huge cost.

So where do we turn when the narrative that has guided our lives for so long is under threat?

- Last week Josh spoke of the importance of not leaning on our own understandings but in everything acknowledging God and seeking his ways. (Proverbs)
- And where best to seek his ways – than opening the Word which promises a light unto our path and a lamp unto our feet.

**The Book of Esther** – a story ‘for such a time as this’.

Esther was the beautiful wife of Persian King Xerxes 1 – singularly the most powerful man in the world at the time

Xerxes was not a man to be trifled with as his first wife was to find out.

Xerxes held a six month long party for his court and then crowns it off with a 7 day after party for all the inhabitants of Susa the capital city. On the seventh day of surely the world’s longest ever party he orders the Queen, Vashti, to appear before the vast crowd, wearing her Crown and displaying her beauty.

She point-blank refuses. This so incenses and no doubt humiliates Xerxes that within a few hours she is now the ex-Queen.

The King organizes a state wide beauty contest with benefits (for the King at least) and Esther – a Jewish orphan brought up by her Uncle Mordecai, enters and wins the prize to become the new Queen. But on her Uncle’s advice she does not disclose to Xerxes her Jewish heritage – probably because the Jews were especially vulnerable – they were foreigners, living in exile.

Palace intrigue follows and sometime later Xerxes is tricked into issuing a decree that on a certain date all Jews are to be exterminated, little realizing he has also signed his wife’s death warrant.

This is in effect a state sanctioned mass genocide of a whole people group

Mordecai (Esther’s uncle) comes to her and appeals to her to intervene.

*“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your family will perish”*

She is terrified – to appear before the King unbidden – risks her life. Xerxes has form – ask former Queen Vashti.

For Esther to presume on Xerxes favour risks a similar fate.

Instead she requests that Mordecai call all Jews to join her in 3 days of prayer and fasting

She masters her fears and appears unbidden before Xerxes – knowing if he refuses to raise his sceptre, she is a dead woman  
To her enormous relief, Xerxes indeed raises his sceptre and Esther is granted an audience.

Wisely she knows not to ask Xerxes to rescind the genocide order – once given it can't be revoked.

Instead she asks Xerxes to attend a feast in his honour

Still multiple plot twists will follow – but finally Xerxes realizes, thanks to Esther's intervention, that he has been tricked by his seemingly loyal PM into issuing the decree to kill all the Jews.

Unable to amend a formal decree, Xerxes adds an addendum to it allowing the Jews to join together and destroy all those who are plotting to destroy them first.

### **What can we learn from Esther's story for a time such as this:**

#### **The Peace that comes from Lament**

- Mordecai lamented, Esther lamented, the Jews in exile lamented
- It was in lament, as Esther brought all her fears before the Lord that she discovered the resolve to conquer her fears and to risk all in seeking an audience with the King
- We are lamenting sickness, the loss of freedoms, isolation from loved ones, loss of income, the loss of friendship/strained relationship
- Our lament is more poignant because for many of us we lament alone – almost all our relationships are virtual – there is no shoulder to lean on, all we can do is take our lament to the Lord in prayer
- Lament is not the absence of faith – it is testament to a deep faith which cries out to God – 'how long Lord' but in that cry acknowledges that we are praying to a God who also weeps

and that God in his providence holds the power to turn our tears into joy.

- We leave our lament at the foot of the cross and our posture becomes one of worship to:
  - our Father -who is ever present (Ps 139)
  - our Saviour – well acquainted with suffering (Hebs 2:8)
  - the Holy Spirit – the comforter and interceder

I am reminded of the old hymn:

What a friend we have in Jesus –  
Have we trial and temptations?  
Are we weak and heavy laden?  
Do your friends despise forsake you?

Oh what peace we often forfeit  
Take it to the Lord in prayer  
In his arms he will take and shield thee  
You Will find a solace there.

It is in lament that we find true peace in the arms of Jesus.

### **God's providence**

Esther faced death either at the whim of her husband or through state sanctioned genocide.

It is inevitable that we too will all experience times where we stand alone and suffer. But as Esther was soon to discover, God redeems all suffering and God's plans for his people would not be thwarted. He had a bigger purpose. God had placed Esther as Queen for precisely a time such as this.

She still had to endure the fear and the terror but the Lord was there. He was at work. Similarly the promise to all of us, especially those who are suffering, are fearful and anxious is that nothing that besets us will have any power to separate us from the love of

God. Nothing can dilute his grace in us nor divert his will from achieving the wonderful plans he has for each of us.

### **So then how shall we live in times such as this?**

It is trusting in God's providence – he has got this! Trust him!

- Practically that means a simple dependence on God's daily provision: praying only for ourselves our daily bread;
- It means that whenever you feel tempted to read just one more COVID article or post – instead reaching for your bible, soaking yourself in stories of God's daily provision
- It means allowing this little light of mine to shine, especially in the darkness, for we are all made to shine
- Praying for our leaders and their wellbeing
- It means daily living out the fruits of the spirit, and particularly the fruit of self control – not allowing our emotions to define us, instead taking everything to the Lord in prayer – and leaving it there!

And as a people of God, I firmly believe we have been called for a time such as this:

- **Demonstrate a love for neighbour** – always considering the wellbeing of others
- **Speak with compassion** – recognizing that well intention, civic minded people, even within our church have reached different conclusions
- **Provide a place of safety** – where our unity in Christ means we can overcome our discord.

At a time where everyone else is losing their head and blaming it on you, that instead we keep our heads and model a winsome kindness, a love for neighbour, a deep and abiding belief that God in his wisdom has got this. And so therefore must we!