



Continuity and Distinctiveness

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Year B, Ordinary 26

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Mark 9:38-50

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Esther's plea, "If it pleases the king let my life be given me ... and the lives of my people."

A desire for continuity.

Jesus declares, "Salt is good; ... Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

A call of distinctiveness.

We're facing the demise of the parish church as we've known it, the Anglican presence in our communities. Rumbblings of this have been around for a long time, this year the discussion made the floor of Synod. The trappings of institution, buildings and properties secured through the good and noble intent, the faithful discipleship of our forebears and gifted to us the now faithful followers. But the world has changed immensely, and we now sag under what has now become a burden.

Shush, don't speak of it, if we try harder and have greater faith and do what we've always done but better we'll turn it round. It isn't just happening here in this small part of the world this is happening but all over.

What frightens us? Not a simple question, not by far. Failure of a generation to bear the faith? Will God disappear? What have we missed? It's as if we're stuck: a desire for continuity; a call of distinctiveness.

For now, let's turn to Esther, and listen for the wisdom it may bring in these times. I'm not sure how many of you know much of the Esther story. It's thought to be a tale, albeit located in an historical period, to be a created drama, historical grounds for the feast of Purim. Esther becomes queen of

Persia after the demise of queen Vashti, dismissed for defying her husband, not obeying his drunken command to parade herself in front of his drunken friends. The story of Esther is full of irony, intrigue, a thickening plot, clever wits and evil villains, royal splendour and a weak ruler and of course the hero who rises to the challenge and saves the day. Only this time the hero is a not very likely heroine. Esther goes about things rather differently from the defiant Vashti, using her power for good and her place for the protection of her people, risking her own life by “coming out” as a Jew. Esther has to work the system in order to do what has to be done, without power of her own, Esther’s power derives from her husband the king of Persia.

Esther’s the only book in the bible with no mention of God. Neither does it speak of prayer, the Law nor most other practices associated with observant Judaism. God’s deliverance of the people in Esther is accomplished through courageous human beings who were probably never sure they were doing the right thing, yet when they saw the wrong, they tried to right it.

The omission of reference to God, core practices or institutions of Judaism in Esther may well be to illustrate how much the Jewish community had been assimilated into the Persian Empire around them. Likely written 3 or 4 centuries before Christ, Esther was written for the people it describes, Jews residing in the Persian Empire, in the diaspora.

Walter Brueggemann describes the book of Esther as “*quintessentially* Jewish ... the tale portrays this tricky Jewish task of identity maintenance that avoids both *sellout* of Jewishness for the sake of imperial advancement and *sectarian withdrawal* into a private Jewish world. Thus, it is an articulation ... of how a distinct religious community practices public theology without giving away its distinctiveness.”¹

Facing the end of the parish church tradition as it’s been known, might cause us to ask about our identity. To ask what informs our sense of being

¹ Brueggemann, W. and Linafelt, T. (2012). *An introduction to the Old Testament: the canon and Christian imagination*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press. P 377

a follower in the Jesus lineage, what influences us, what makes us distinctive as Christians? Is continuity and distinctiveness assured through buildings and organizational structures? Bonhoeffer suggested “Christianity, conceals within itself a germ that is hostile to the church. It is far too easy to base our claims to God on our own Christian religiosity and our church commitment, and in so doing utterly misunderstand and distort the Christian idea.”²

In the gospel we hear John wanting to prevent non followers being dispensers of hope and healing. Jesus reorients with the rebuke ‘Whoever is not against us is for us.’ The abundance of God spills out heedless of our desire to possess. Invoking healing in Jesus’ name transforms, changes all involved, whether witness or participant, something shifts and maybe along the way the odd demon gets cast out.

Could that millstone of stumbling and falling be those things we do or say, or choose not to do or say when we might, that impede or misdirect the flow of God in the world? Each time we speak or act or this way or fail to, we harm those we act against **and** ourselves. We could choose to be blind to our impact. But because we decide to be heart-open to this God we indwell, we choose otherwise, we choose to be aware of it.

We choose to try not to impede the flow of God in the world, to affirm divine indwelling in the world, or, to use today’s gospel terms - that saltiness is in us and saltiness is in the world. That we trust the saltiness; the flow is in us. That it has place, we have place, and we express this into life. Saltiness isn’t a tool, a system of influence. It’s something gut-real, lending us courage to name and wisdom to discern the call for justice amidst the chaos of double speak. Saltiness gives us the heart to be steady and still and take our place. Honest in our failings, in our need for one another, in our not knowing and willingness to learn. Faithfulness trusts in the saltiness in you, in each other and in the world.

² Jones, J.D. and Fredrickson, D. (2023) *Being church in a liminal time: Remembering, Letting go, resurrecting*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2

The way we are and act in the world affects our saltiness, and the saltiness made visible in the world. Like Esther we're to be mindful, skilled, aware, able to utilize, to release and realize that which enacts what we might call the life of God in the world. Whether that be justice, hope, new life, however this is seen and known through the distinctive community of which you are a part that enables this to come to life. Mindful of the distinct way you do this, with heart awareness of the way Jesus enacted – **for** those and all parts of creation denied their share of what brings and sustains life.

Christendom hasn't existed for many a long year yet our attachment to Christendom's identity markers remains. We still imagine and measure success in terms of growth in numbers and money and social and political influence. Even though we know the church is a fading player in our world and has been for many years. Are we willing to reimagine what success might look like? Could the tale of Esther help remind us that distinctiveness, identity, self-understanding of what it is to be a Jesus way follower matters. For this directs and energises us to engage in the world not in any old way but in the distinctive way we're called to do so.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests "it's the faithfulness of God that makes it possible for people of faith to maintain hope when so much of what we are familiar with is unraveling, when the old is passing away, and when we cannot be at all clear what the new will be. In such a time it is vital that we keep trying to understand the reality we face as we also seek to discern the promise the present holds. We do that recognizing that no one, certainly not us, will get it completely right, but all of us have something to contribute to the discussion. It is in that spirit and hope that we make our contribution."³

³ *ibid*, 2