

Queen Vashti - the courage to resist

Sisters and brothers, verses from the Book of Esther are suggested for this Sunday. How could I not pay attention to this gem of a book in the Old Testament? The book of Esther itself is not an obviously religious book. God is never mentioned at all, but God happens all the time in what people do... The challenge is to decide who the godly characters are: there are people who are selfish, prideful, violent, and there are those who risk everything for others and choose integrity in the face of opposition and danger.

Doing research on this small and fairly unknown OT book, I found that hardly anybody had ever preached on it. Which is not surprising, because over the centuries the book of Esther has not been considered worth part of the lectionaries of the Christian churches...

It has only found its place in the feast of Purim which since then the Jews celebrate in spring. So every Jew would read the book of Esther at least once a year, when they celebrate the feast of Purim.

Esther is a wonderful story of God's providence and the character of his people told with humour, irony, repetition and contrast.

You have heard the first of ten chapters as readings this morning.

This is only the beginning of the story. And I will try to figure out the framework for you, in which Esther finally becomes a queen whereas Vashti is losing all honours of being royal.

A part of the Jewish people had been living in the empire of the Persian King Ahasverus. Among them was Esther, a young woman and her relative Mordechai. When the Persian Queen Vashti was expelled by her husband because she had denied him total obedience, a search for a new queen began. Numerous beautiful young women from all over the kingdom were taken to the king's harem and costly prepared for a night with the king.

Esther had come there, too. According to Mordechai's advice she did not give away the secret of her Jewish heritage. And Esther finally is the one who pleases the king most and becomes the new queen.

Meanwhile one of the court's officials Haman had succeeded in becoming the „second man“ of the empire. All the king's servants had to bow down to Haman from then on – only Mordechai did not.

And because of this insult to Haman provoked by Mordechai, Haman decided to have all the Jews killed all over the Persian empire.

The king had already confirmed it... the day of the pogrome was supposed to be found out by drawing lots...

Mordechai sent news to Esther that she should go and see the king and intervene in favour of her people.

Although the appearance at the king's without being asked can cause a death penalty to everybody - no matter who it is - Esther dared to do so. Against all expectations Esther did not receive punishment but won the king's favour and revealed to him and Haman the story of her background: that if all the Jews are supposed to be wiped out the queen would have to face death as well...

The king immediately revoked the already planned pogrome against the Jewish people and sentenced Haman to death. But as it has always been: moving out of the way one difficult person does not straight away break up hate and contempt that has been established over decades between the different sections of the population. A terrible lot of fighting and violence had to be lived through until the Jewish people with the help of Queen Esther found to peace and justice and the unlimited permission to stay in the Persian empire.

But:

The details of Esther's daring reign must not let us forget that Queen Esther was not the first queen to defy King Ahasverus.

The standard had already been set by her predecessor, the king's first wife, Queen Vashti.

Vashti is the first female character who is introduced in the book of Esther. Vashti serves only as a foil for Esther's story later on, but she is truly a strong female character who loses her position as a result of her refusal to obey the king. It is ironic that her punishment gives her exactly what she wanted: she will never again have to appear before the king...

Either King Ahasverus had notoriously bad luck in choosing wives, or else he was attracted to independent women and didn't know it...

His first wife, Queen Vashti, refused to come to the King when summoned; his second wife, Queen Esther, went to the king without summons.

The similarity is striking!

These are two women who took advantage of their position as wives of a prominent public figure. Their stories give us at least a slight idea what enormous responsibilities and pressures were placed upon them...

In the case of the queens Vashti and Esther, each queen was faced with a decision whether to accept or reject the role expected of her.

Each woman had to face the consequences of her decision. And the outcome of Queen Vashti's story was not at all as fortunate as Esther's.

A feast had been called in the empire.

For his princes, royal subjects, administrative officers and military personnel King Ahasverus gave a big party: from Persia to Media. The festivities were supposed to last for more than one hundred eighty days.

So pleased with all that and himself the king extended the celebration for seven more days in Susa, the home of his winter palace.

Unlike to the others, the festivities in Susa were open to all, great and small alike: free flowing wine served in golden goblets and much more... and all taking place without cause.

It wasn't the king's birthday or an important military victory... it was just to show off all the splendour and richness of the king and his court.

And beside that in a separate quarter of the winter palace, a second party was going on: Queen Vashti and the women of Susa were enjoying their own ceremonies, because women in King Ahasverus' empire were excluded from these public festivities.

But with Queen Vashti, the women of Susa had at least a small opportunity to join in the festive spirit that filled their land: the wives of noblemen and the wives of peasants were celebrating together, and Queen Vashti took seriously her responsibilities to the women of the land.

Back in the courtyard, however, the mood of the men's party had come to a feverish pitch: singing and laughter, dancing and drinking, boasting about conquering countries and women had come to the height.

Leading the whole was the king.

All other women, the king boasted, paled in comparison to his wife, Queen Vashti. And to prove his point he sent seven trusted servants to bring the queen to him immediately...

What followed sent shockwaves throughout the kingdom.

It was enough to sober the king:

„But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command..“

Imagine the king's humiliation!

Flanked by his friends, observed by all – friends and others – he could not afford that: public insubordination, especially from a woman; even if that woman was the queen.

Perhaps under different circumstances – in the privacy of their chambers or in a private discussion between the two of them over dinner – the king would have accepted. Perhaps...

But:

In front of all the men who now looked on in horror, the king had to act – and act quickly.

At all costs, it must never be said that the king was hen-pecked. Imagine, if a man could not rule his own house – which meant wife and children – then surely he could not rule a whole empire.

In other words the king's honour and ego were at stake. The private differences between a man and his wife became a public battleground with political and social consequences.

King Ahasverus called in the wisest men of his kingdom for deliberations. Whatever their recommendations, he would follow. They all feared that Queen Vashti's example might encourage other wives to rebel against their husbands too: they saw a great threat to the dominance of every husband and man in the kingdom. The objective was clear: an example would have to be made of Queen Vashti. Too many women looked upon her. If that ever circulated... anarchy would spread throughout the country... The wise men were afraid: women could get all kinds of ideas in their heads. They might even think they were men's equals, capable of making their own decisions... No longer would any man be safe in his own house...

In the eyes of the king's ministers the queen's disobedience had social, political and economic consequences and dangers... Her behaviour was considered a threat to the created order and to national security of course.

For her refusal to leave her own guests and come to her husband Vashti paid dearly.

The rest of the story, we know all too well. In the end she lost her crown. She lost her home and her position in society. But she kept her head held up high and her pride and dignity unhurt! The king's demand for his wife to come and show herself before his drunken guests was just too much. There comes a time when even a queen has to put her foot down and say No. Enough is enough!

Queen Vashti was banished from Susa. She had to leave everything behind, but she kept her integrity.

In front of the other women who looked upon her as a role model, she had shown the courage to refuse to compromise.

The queen had made her decision...

Let us not take that too easy:

This woman has not just had one of many quarrels in a marriage; this woman refused, even in the face of banishment, to comply with a humiliating command. And many women and men over the centuries have followed Queen Vashti's example of choosing exile over compromise.

Queen Vashti might have been lost to history, if there had not been the second queen: Esther.

Esther too, did not do what she was supposed to do and saved the life of her nation.

And one can well imagine that Esther had much for which to thank Vashti: King Ahasverus might not have been prepared to forgive Queen Esther had not his first wife taught him that, like it or not, some women will make their own decisions.

At least with Esther, the king was willing to hear her...

Vashti's story ends in the dark. She has only prepared the way of freedom for others... like so many after her have done.

And because of that we have a responsibility to remember her, to walk in her footsteps into the future of men and women living in freedom and at peace with one another.

What seems as itself only a failed attempt of liberation, can as a whole in the story of the book of Esther be the saving of a whole nation's future.

What in our eyes is only a single woman's destiny, in the eyes of God may certainly be a unique, precious act: an example of how to follow Jesus, how to act in life, how not to accept a false compromise and the ridiculing and violating of human dignity...

To me the story of Vashti is...

...an encouragement to simply rely on the small resources of resistance which we have today...

...and a promise of the presence of God even at times which seem godless.

Let me come to an end –

expressing my hope that Vashti's calm strength and her No will live on in our lives developing freedom, dignity and justice because we all are beautiful and loved by God – and only that counts.

And - remember: God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of mindfulness. Amen.

Prayer

Lord God, bearing the life and strength of Queen Vashti and many others in our mind, always asking the question, "what would Jesus have done?", we commit ourselves, our words and our deeds, our listening and learning, our praying and serving, our coming and going, to the leading of your spirit, that is not a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and love and of mindfulness. Amen.