

A crown of thorns – Sermon to Esther 1:1 – 2:9

Reading a book published by a retired American black female bishop I came across the story of the queens Esther and Vashti which can be read in the short book of Esther in the Old Testament.

Not that I had not known of the existence of the book and its story but I have never heard somebody preaching or lecturing about it.

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 the Jews ever since, and also at Jesus' time, celebrate in spring.

You have heard the first of ten chapters and a few verses of chapter 2 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.

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 new queen was looked for.

Numberless beautiful young women from all over the kingdom were taken to the king's harem and costily 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“ in the empire. All the king's servants had to bow down to Haman from then on – only Mordechai did not.

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

The king had already accepted... the day of the pogrom was supposed to be found out by drawing lots... when 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 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 pogrom 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.

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!

They 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 such women...

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 lasted 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 private 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 for 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, he boasted, paled in comparison to his wife, Queen Vashti. And to prove his point he sent seven trusted eunuchs 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.

The objective was clear: an example would have to be made of Queen Vashti. Too many women looked upon her. If that ever circulated... that the king’s wife had openly refused... anarchy would spread throughout the country...

The wise men were afraid: women could get all kinds of crazy ideas in their heads. They might even think they were men’s equals, capable of making their own decisions...

No man would any longer be safe in his own house...

In the eyes of those men the queen’s disobedience had social, political and economic consequences and dangers... Her behaviour was 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 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 dehumanizing 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 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 seen as itself only seems 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:

salt of the earth and light of the world, if we wish so...

an example of how to act in life, how not to accept a false compromise and the ridiculing and violating of human dignity...

For me the story of Vashti is...

...an invitation to believe that God's promises will certainly come true...

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

...and a promise of the presence of God even at times that are seeming godless.

Let me come to an end –

not with the story of resistance and liberation, but with this sermon.

Let me come to an end –

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

Amen.