

Esther 5:1-8 and 7:1-7 , and Jesus' commission to the twelve Matthew 10 1-15

This is a complex story of Jewish positioning within the reign of the imperial power of Xerxes. An empire nearly to rival the Empire on whom the sun never set, 127 provinces from India to Cush. A King whose displeasure it was foolish to resist. Queen Vashti had experienced the divine displeasure, refusing to display her beauty and dance for for the King and the nobility who gathered in the hanging gardens of Susa. This refusal cost her position...demoted as Queen...Vashti was the cause of the invoking of the laws of the Medes and Persians which is never revoked

The fear that' when the women of the nobility hear of queen Vashti's resistance to her male lord all of them would become disrespectful and there would be discord.

Now there was a search undertaken for 'a young Virgin who will please the King, and replace the uppity woman Vashti.

Enter Mordecai who had a cousin whom he brought up as his own daughter when she was orphaned. She was dependant, beautiful, compliant. Esther was placed in the Kings Harem and became the most favoured, made queen, but had kept her Jewish origin and relationship to Mordecai a secret.

Enter Haman who became incensed at Mordecai's refusal to honour him, to bow down and honour him more than any other of the court nobles. Thus incensed he sets out to destroy the Jews and Mordecai. Interesting at this point where honouring and respect falls out. Vashti fails to be compliant and is deposed. Mordecai however starts a dispute which will put Esther's life on the line. She is asked by Mordecai to intervene on his behalf and for the Jewish people ...with a barbed threat, that if she does nothing her name and the name of her family will perish for all time....the end of hope for a Jewish family.

What sort of position of power, what sort of request is this? Request out of a certain sort of bullying...you put your life on the line or else? And who had put her into this position? Mordecai.

This is an ambiguous reading? A difficult piece of scripture. It is not a passage about women's liberation and empowerment. After all Esther had had at no point the freedom to say no to either becoming the chosen virgin for king Xerxes, or then to speak out on the Jews behalf, whose difficulties had been stirred up by Mordecai's refusal to play political ball with Haman the Agagite. Women here are sorting out male and national power plays.

It is a theme we pick up in liberation movements across the last thirty years of independence movements.

Women asked to fall in with male agendas because afterwards their agendas of emancipation and liberation will be addressed. And how often does this occur?

It is happening today in Africa

It doubtless happens in Asia

It is happening today unfortunately in the church where women are expected to give their time, energies and talents for nothing, so as not to risk the bankruptcy, immobilisation of the church, or not to rock the boat about female episcopacy because of the fear of splits, divisions and untold political fall out...but whose struggle is it in the first place?

Esther does see the threat to her people, and Haman himself is no hero, proud and vindictive. But this is not an illustration of unencumbered female power. It is the exercise of the power of female beauty at the behest of her controlling male, it is really the story of Xerxes, Haman and Mordecai in which Vashti and Esther play bit parts.

Except, except...Mordecai reflects that maybe it is for a time such as this that Esther have been placed here. We know these moments in our own lives, that no matter how unsatisfactory the circumstances, perhaps, just maybe it is for such a time as this that we have been called to be in a

certain place at a certain time, no matter how unsatisfactory and infelicitous the circumstances.

Leadership, women's empowerment, the scope of mission

1. Even those whose title is leader, like Esther, not actually in power from a position of freedom and their power is very circumscribed. Many Bishops feel like this, and it is important that we seek to put those who are in leadership positions in as free a position under God as possible to lead in prayerful freedom.
2. Women's empowerment: to be not just women figureheads, place filling but genuinely released for leadership. Watch for all the nasty moments of blackmail and limitations which hang around much of women's participation in the church in positions of authority.

3. Effective leader responds to the need which she sees around her. Walks the talk of faith, builds teams and releases people into their ministry and power
4. Church must teach the honouring of ministry in the proper provision for people who are released into mission and ministry...audit on this useful in the church...post traumatic stress syndrome on the way back in...the real costliness of ministry, not to be sought out by the individual but by the groups into which he or she is received. This very challenging to both churches and mission agencies.
5. A leader is always open to challenge, and able to reconsider their vision and parameters of action. Canaanite woman and Jesus, and Jesus responds.

May God bless these words to us, and empower us in our own ministries to respond to the human need we see around us, and build our communities to be those in which the healing ministry of Christ to mind, body, spirit and society is effected.