

## *The beauty and the beast*

Sermon by Jan Hieminga

Esther 7

Today I like to tell you the story of the beauty and the beast. It is not the about the play you may have seen in the theatres not to long ago. It is about another beauty, her name is Esther and the beast, well that is another story. He got what beasts deserve.

The story takes place in Susa the capital of the mighty Persian empire where Xerxes or Ahasveras, depending on what language you want to use, is king. The time is around 480 B.C and the story begins inside the palace of the king. Xerxes is not having a very good day. He has just sent his queen Vashti away, never to return to the palace. He has fired her because she had not obeyed his orders. He had thought about what to do after she had refused to dance for him during the party he had had. Some party it had been. It had taken 180 days to prepare for it. During that time he had put all his wealth on display for everyone to see and the party itself had lasted 7 days. Everything had gone well. The gardens of the palace were beautifully decorated with white and blue linen hangings around the perimeter. There were marble pillars, couches of gold for the guests to sit on.

And the wine was served in golden goblets. Yes everything had gone well. If it had not been for this embarrassing moment when Vashti had told the king to forget it when he asked her to dance for him and his guests. She had had her own party with her women friends. And when the king had sent a servant to tell her that she was wanted at his party to dance for them, she had said no. She knew that he was only trying to impress his friends. She knew that she had become queen because of her looks, She was not going to show off her body for a group of men who had had too much to drink. She had said no.

This had thrown the king for a loop. Nobody had ever said no to him before and if they had they would have paid for it with their lives. But what was he to do with the queen, his own wife. He had sought the advice from his senior advisors and they had all thought, what if this is the beginning of something. What if we get home one day and find our wives saying no to us. This needs to be nipped in the bud. And they had advised the king to send her away so that all the women in the country would know this was not an example for them to follow. Imagine wives disobeying their husbands. What would the world come to then...

And now the king was looking for a new queen. It was not that he had a shortage of wives, that was not the problem, but he had to select one of them to be the official queen or he had to find a new one somewhere else. He had sent servants around the country to look for someone who was queen material. And they had come across a girl who was living with her cousin Mordechai. Her name was Hadassah but people knew her as Esther. She had a beauty that was not just on the outside. She had an inner beauty and charm that attracted people to her. When the king's men saw her they thought, she is the one, and they brought her to the palace. Mordechai had talked to her before she went and said this is an opportunity for you but don't tell them who you are. If they know that you are Jewish and that we came from Canaan as prisoners when we were taken

into exile, they may not want to keep you in the palace. They may not want foreigners and certainly not as the queen.

At the palace she was introduced to the person in charge of the king's harem and she was told the rules of the house. She was told about the ranking of the women there. The girls who were waiting to be introduced to the king and the ones who had become the king's wives. She was told that it would take at least 12 months before she would be introduced to the king and during that time she would undergo beauty treatments, be put on a special diet of the finest food and learn about the ways of the palace. When her time to meet the king had come, he was so taken by her that he did not take long to make up his mind. She was the perfect replacement for Vashti and Esther was promoted to queen. That did not mean that she now had unlimited access to the king. She had to keep her distance and was only to approach the king when asked to. But she did have her own quarters in the palace and she had her own servants.

Mordechai her cousin, who had taken care of her as his own daughter when her parents died, had taken up a place in the gate to the palace. That is where a lot of men hung out and met. That is where business was done and decisions were made. But he was there for another reason. He was there to find out how Esther was doing. He would give the guards messages for the queen and Esther would return messages to him the same way. That is how they kept in touch and that is how Mordechai got a picture of what was going on behind the palace walls. Besides, it filled his days, which had now become very lonely without Esther. One day when he was sitting in the gate, he overheard a conversation between a group of men, close by him. They were speaking in hushed voices. He could not make out everything that was being said but one thing was clear, they were planning to kill the king. They were planning a coup. When Mordechai heard that, he thought not only of the king whose life was in danger, he also thought of Esther. She was in danger too and he quickly sent a message to her and told her to warn the king of the impending danger. The king took fast action and the danger was diverted.

In the meantime the business of ruling a large empire had to go on and the king had created a team of trusted officials to help him with this. One of them was called Haman. He had worked himself up through the ranks and he was now the top civil servant, the head of the government officials. That position came with certain perks. One perk was that all people had to bow for him when he walked by. The same thing they would do for the king himself. And all people did except one. Every time he walked through the gate, Mordechai looked the other way. He did not bow for Haman. And that really got to him. Who did this guy think he was? Haman knew that he was a Jew and that made it even worse. Haman knew that the Jews had been taken to Persia against their will but they had mostly been treated well. Most of them had integrated well in the country and were living by the laws of the land. Most of them did as they were told to do and when Haman walked by most of them did bow for him but not Mordechai. Did he still have trouble accepting the authority of a foreign country? I don't know. Did he believe that he was only to bow to God and not to people? I don't know. And Haman did not care about the reason, all he cared about was that there was someone who did not want to bow before him and that he would get him for this one way or another.

He thought about this and decided, “Why let him pay for this alone?” I will let all the Jews in the country pay for this. And he went to the king and said there is a group of people in our country who do not obey the laws and therefore they could become a threat to our security. I suggest that we get rid of them before they become a real problem. And the king said, “Well Haman, you are in charge of security. Do what you think is right”. And a law was made and signed by the king. That meant that it could not be revoked. All the Jews were to be killed. All they had to do is decide on a date. They rolled the dice, the “pur” and the date was decided. All the local officials in the country were informed, the soldiers were put on alert, and now it was just a matter of time before the day would arrive when all Jews were to be exterminated.

The king and Haman had a drink, but the city was bewildered. There was great mourning amongst the Jews. They were fasting and praying and weeping and wailing. They put on sackcloth as a sign of great distress. And Mordechai showed up in the gate wearing a sack cloth too. When the guards told Esther that her cousin was wearing sackcloth, she sent him some clothes and said don't do that, but Mordechai told her what was going on. He told her that all the Jews would be killed and when they found out that she was Jewish, she would be in danger too. He told her, Esther you are our only hope. You are the only one who can get to the king and stop this mass execution. Esther wrote back, “You don't understand. I can't just go to the king and say, excuse me, I like to talk to you. I could lose my life if I did that”. But Mordechai wrote back, “You have to find a way. You are the only chance we have”. Esther wrote back, “I will try but I want all the Jewish people in the whole country to fast for me for three days. I will ask my servants to do the same and when the three days are over, I will go and see the king”. She added “If I perish I perish.”

When the three days of fasting were over Esther went to the king's quarters in the palace knowing that she was not supposed to be there. When the king saw her he took his golden sceptre and held it out to her. That was a sign that he allowed her to come in and that she would not be punished. The king asked, “What is it Esther. What do you want? Don't be afraid to ask. I will give it to you even if it is half of my kingdom”. Esther said, “I would like you and Haman to have dinner with me tomorrow. Then I will bring you my request”. The king accepted and told Haman to be there. Haman went home, proud as a peacock, bragging to his family, “Guess who I am having dinner with tonight. But when the dinner came and the king said, “Now Esther, tell us what you want”, she could not bring up the courage to tell them and she said, “Could you come back again tomorrow and could we have dinner again.” By now the king was really curious and said, “Okay we will come back”. Haman went home bragging again, “I am having dinner with the queen and the king again. If it was not for that Jew Mordechai, who is really getting under my skin, everything would be perfect”. His wife said, “Well I thought you were in charge. Why don't you build a gallows and have him hanged? Then your problem will be over”. Good idea - and a 75 foot gallows was built in his own backyard. That way he would have a front row seat when Mordechai would be hanged.

That night something happened. The king could not sleep and asked someone to bring him the chronicles, the records of the country from the time he had been king. He may have figured that if that did not put him to sleep nothing would. He had them read out loud and when they came to

the day, when a plot against the king was diverted because of a message from Mordechai, the king said, "Did we ever recognize him for that?". "No Sire, we did not". "Well we should". He heard some noise outside and said, "Who is there?" It was Haman. He had come in early to catch up with some work and the king said, "Haman, there is someone I want to honour, do you have any ideas?" Haman thought, who could that be. He could only think of one person the king would want to honour and that was him. So he thought what would be a nice thing to do. He said, "Well king, why don't you parade him through the city in one of your own chariots. Make sure the royal crest is showing on the harnesses of the horses and have a senior official walk before the chariot and call out, this is what is done for the man the king wants to honour". "Good idea Haman. Why don't you do that for Mordechai. I want to honour him for saving my life. Why don't you walk before the chariot and announce that I want to honour him this way. I think that will be a nice gesture, Haman".

We all have days that don't turn out the way we had planned and this was one of those days for Haman. I don't know what he told his wife that day but I know he was not bragging. He was so down that the king had to send a servant to remind him of the dinner they had with Esther. The dinner was great. The food was great. The wine was great and then the king could no longer wait and said, "What is it Esther you want to ask me". And Esther blurts out, "I am asking you for my life and the life of my people. If we had been sold as slaves I would not have bothered you, but this is about my life".

The king turned red, and asked, "Who is trying to kill you?" And Esther, who had focused her beautiful eyes on the king, now turns to Haman and says, "He is. He is behind it all". There are moments in your life when everything stops. When you get news that is so horrendous that it is as if everything comes to a standstill. It was that way for the king. All he could do was get up and go outside to let it sink in what he had just heard. It was that way for Haman too. He realized that his death warrant had just been signed. All he can do is beg for mercy. He throws himself at the feet of Esther and begs her to save his life. At that moment the king walks back in and sees Haman at Esther's feet. He misinterprets his actions and says, "Are you even molesting the queen in my own palace?"

The king looks around, questioning what to do next. A servant says, "Well there is a gallows in the garden of Haman's house. It was meant for Mordechai. The king had the answer he needed. "Hang him on it", he says.

That night Haman's family did have a front row seat to a hanging, only the body was different.

Now that the secret is out that Esther is a Jew, she may as well tell the king also that Mordechai is her cousin. Mordechai is brought in and is given the job that had just become vacant as a result of recent events. But he has work to do. There is a law signed by the king of Persia that on the day determined by the pur, all Jews will be killed and that law can not be revoked. Mordechai's first job is to find a way to save the Jews. He draws up another law, that says that on that day the Jews will be allowed to gather together and defend themselves. This law also gets signed by the

king of Persia. When the day arrives the Jews are prepared those who still want to attack the Jews have a formidable force to contend with. The Jews had been saved.

It is a beautiful story, is it not?. But you might well ask, why is this story in the bible?

The bible is the word of God and in it we learn about God and our relationship with God. But in the book of Esther there is no mention of God at all. It has all the elements for a good Hollywood movie. It is a story about a beauty and a beast. The beauty saves the day and the beast gets what he deserves. At the end of the story the Jewish people are told to celebrate this story each year at a feast called "Purim" They are to remember how the pur, the die, was thrown to determine the day the Jews were to be terminated. And how the action of a beautiful queen saved their lives. But what can we learn from it? For me the story reminds me that even when it seems that God is not involved in the events of the world, he is at work for the good of his people. Even when we don't acknowledge God's presence, he is still there. In and through and behind the events, he is at work to save his people. For me it means that even when it seems that the events take their twists and turns and things seem to be happening by chance, God is there to line them up and make them work for the good of his people. The story of Esther gives me encouragement and hope so that when I watch the news or read the paper I know that even when there is no mention of God, he is still at work. He is still in charge and in the end the story of our life and the story of the world events will have a happy ending. In spite of all the threats and the worries that threaten our lives and the survival of the human race, I know that there is a God at work for the good of his people, for the good of you and me.