

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21) – Year B – September 30, 2009 - Homily**  
**Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

In a roundabout way, we are coming back to the lessons from the Gospel of Mark this evening, but not before we have explored the curious story of the Book of Esther. The story of Esther is the origin of the feast of Purim in the Jewish calendar. The feast is notable for the sharing of food, building of community, and inclusion of the poor at the table. For Christians the feast calls to mind our celebration of Holy Eucharist, and the gathering of the church at God's Table, where justice prevails.

The weak Persian King Ahasuerus has recently promoted Haman, an Agagite, and ordered that all should do obeisance to him. There is no love lost between the Jewish people and the Agagites, and Mordecai the Jew, who happens to be Esther's uncle, refuses to bow to Haman. Such is the depth of Haman's hatred that he cleverly arranges to have the King agree to eradicate all the Jews for Mordecai's lack of respect. Mordecai appeals to Queen Esther to save the lives of herself and her people, through whatever means she can as the King's new wife. This is the point where we enter the story this evening. The deeper questions that we need to bear in mind include justice for the marginalized of society, and how we live out our faith, especially in times of persecution. Just how far would any of us be willing to go to maintain our integrity in the profession and practice of our Christian faith? It is a question that many faithful saints and martyrs across the centuries have answered, and one that is still relevant today.

For the vast majority of us, the practice of our faith in Christ has never been a life threatening issue, because we are blessed to live in a society that values religious freedom. In fact, the majority of American adults still identify themselves as Christians. So you and I are not members of a religious minority, unlike Christians in other parts of the world today who face persecution or even death because they are Christians. One of the students I met at seminary, an ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Pakistan, was from a region where Christians were in the religious minority. He shared how he and his family lived under almost daily threat of violence from the religious extremists in his home area. He shared several stories of the tremendous courage of Christians who refused to deny Christ and suffered terrible beatings or loss of jobs. As if severe beatings are not bad enough – some members of his faith community were rendered permanently disabled, unable to work, and therefore unable to support their families. It's important for us to understand that in the poorer regions of countries such as Pakistan, being unable to work, or losing a job because of religious discrimination usually means the difference between a family barely surviving, and starving to death. As recently as August of this year, the World Council of Churches appealed again to Pakistan's president to "ensure the safety and security of Christians in the Punjab province.... According to reports, seven people were burned alive and some forty houses belonging to Christians were torched in Gojra on [the first of] August. Gojra is a city located some 160 kilometres from the Punjab province's capital Lahore." Sadly, Pakistan is not the only region of the world where there is great hostility to Christians.

Going back to our reading from the Book of Esther, Mordecai was not willing to bow to anyone except God, and perhaps least of all to an enemy of the Jewish people. Haman tried to make sure that the consequences of a single act of religious integrity would result in the destruction of all the Jews. It is amazing how much history repeats itself, even within the Scriptures. In order to gain the King's favor, Esther has arranged a banquet so that she might

have the opportunity to petition the King on behalf of her people. At the feast, the king is offering a beautiful woman whatever she may ask for, even up to half his kingdom. In the Gospels, we read about another weak king – Herod – who offers another beautiful young woman whatever she asks even up to half his kingdom. In many ways, the similarities end there, although in both instances someone will die. Queen Esther’s petition is for her life, and her request is for the life of her people. It is a righteous request based on a grave injustice and even King Ahasuerus recognizes the betrayal of Haman. Haman pays the ultimate price for his hatred and lack of compassion and mercy. At Herod’s banquet, Salome requests the head of the John the Baptist. Despite the injustice, out of foolish pride, Herod acquiesces. John pays the ultimate price for refusing to compromise his faith, beliefs, and integrity.

In tonight’s Gospel reading from Mark, we find Jesus expounding on the cost of discipleship. One of Jesus’ concerns is to maintain the health of the whole body of Christ, so that individually and collectively we may be agents of healing in the world. As we saw on Sunday, the violent language is not meant to be taken literally. It is the classic Jewish hyperbole that signifies the seriousness with which God attributes to our faith in Christ Jesus. Having said that, Jesus may also have been alluding to one of the most transformative experiences in the history of the Jewish people. The timeline places the story of the Maccabean revolts some time between the end of the Hasmonean dynasty in 63 B.C. and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The tyrannical ruler against whom the story unfolds is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who desecrated the Temple with idol worship and seemed determined to exterminate the Jews. The saddest tale is of a mother and her seven sons who are tortured to death for refusing to eat pork, a meat considered unclean and prohibited to faithful Jews. Quite remarkably, not one member of the family abandoned their faith, set a poor example for others, or in other words became a stumbling block to faith in God. There is another important lesson from the suffering of the heroes of the Maccabean revolt. In reflecting on their suffering, the Jewish people were forced to ask the question, “why did God allow this to happen?” This is not a question that anyone can easily answer, but it is one that implicitly demands God’s justice and mercy. For many Jews, their continued faith and hope in God, and God’s graciousness was found in the increasingly important notion of God’s vindication through the resurrection. The idea is that the death of a righteous martyr atones for the sins of the people. As Christians, our own faith in God and God’s justice rests on sharing our hope in eternal life. That is the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection as God’s gift of salvation for the whole world.

Since we still live in a world where religious persecution continues to this day, let us pray for courage and strength for all must face an accuser and proclaim their faith in Jesus, knowing that it may cost them their lives. Every single child of God is precious in His sight. Our desire to act and stand in solidarity against injustice and persecution should not be motivated by the scale of the injustice. The salt of Christ cannot effect healing to the world, unless you and I share our saltiness and apply it one cut, one wound, one person at a time. Finally, let us remember that there are many other injustices in the world that push our brothers and sisters to the margins of society. Here in the U.S. it is more likely that we will encounter the same lack of compassion and mercy against the poor, the homeless, or the mentally ill that Haman brought against Mordecai and his people. Esther’s courageous acts of faith led to relief from her people’s enemies and the continuing celebration of the feast of Purim. Putting our own faith into action can also turn the sorrow of the lost, neglected and despised into joy and hope, as we share how much God loves and cares for all His children with unbounded passion.

Amen.