

Trinity 6 2011

Isaiah 55 vv 1-5 p742, Romans 9 vv 1-5 p1135, Matthew 14 vv 13-21 p981

Esther 3⁸: *And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.*

Those are chilling words – the very antithesis of tolerant multiculturalism. They are reminiscent of the sort of ideas Anders Breivik was writing about on his blog before planting that bomb in Oslo and shooting those children and young people on the island of Utoya. Breivik was talking about Moslems. He and people like him fear the consequences of Moslem immigration into Europe. They believe that there are far too many Moslems in Britain and Europe, that they refuse to integrate with western society, that they reject our secular or Christian values, that they refuse to assimilate, that they insist on preserving their own culture and law at the expense of social cohesion, and that ultimately they would like to take over and compel us all to choose between adopting Islam or living as second class citizens in what would by then be European Islamic states. Breivik attacked the Norwegian Government and Norway's ruling political party because he believed that the politicians had effectively sold out Europe's white Christian heritage. There are many people, most of whom would have nothing whatsoever to do with his obscene violence, who believe that there is something in what he says.

Fears like these are nothing new. Haman, a senior official in the Persian empire, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, thought the same. He was concerned that within the provinces of the empire there was a group of people, bound together by race and religion, who refused to assimilate. They insisted on maintaining their own culture and religious beliefs. They lived by their own law. For this reason they kept separate from their neighbours, living together, worshipping together, socialising together and doing business together. If forced to choose between rendering unto God and rendering unto Caesar, they would always choose to render unto God. So they were a threat to the cohesion of the Persian Empire. They challenged its values and undermined its unity. If the Persian Empire were attacked by a foreign power, on which side, Haman might have asked, would these people fight?

The people concerned were, of course, the Jews and Haman's solution was to exterminate them. *If it please the king*, he went on in v9, *let it be written that they may be destroyed*. Chilling! The Book of Esther then goes on to describe how God delivered His people on that occasion from their enemies in the Persian Empire. We know only too well that the Jews have suffered similarly down through the ages wherever they have settled, most notably in Christian Europe. There are some amazing copies of the Book of Esther in existence, dating from the Middle Ages, bound in silver or gold and decorated with precious stones. Jews down through the ages have treasured the story of Esther as they have faced up to the realities of persecution, pogrom and massacre in their own generations. Hitler too had his final solution to the "Jewish problem." The events described in Esther are still understandably commemorated every year in the Jewish Feast of Purim.

A lot of us do worry about multiculturalism. Very easily we perceive people who are not like us as a threat. Kent villages worry about gypsies and New Age travellers setting up camp near their homes. In the poorer parts of our towns and cities people fear that immigrants are taking their homes and their jobs. Liberal Christians and secularists are torn between affirming immigrant culture and religious freedom and dealing with the fact that some immigrant cultures and religions have very different ideas from our own about the rights of women and children, freedom of speech and certain other rights which we take for granted. If tolerance is the only universal virtue, do we by definition have to tolerate intolerance? And anti-Semitism is certainly far from dead even in tolerant multicultural Britain.

If you are like me, you must be very conflicted at this point. Breivik's actions fill us with horror. So do Haman's and Hitler's. Genocide, the attempt to kill everyone of a particular race or culture just because they belong to that particular race or culture, is surely one of the worst sins imaginable, one of the worst crimes against humanity. So would it be to oppress people of another race, religion or culture. No humane person can contemplate forced repatriation – sending immigrant communities home, wherever home may be, whether they want to go or not. Neither could any decent person consider persecution as an option, forcibly coercing people to change their religion or their cultural values (except, I should say, in the most extreme circumstances, such as when the Victorian Christian British forcibly ended the Indian practice of suttee in which widows were burnt on the funeral pyres of their husbands, or when the authorities in this country in the present day take action against female circumcision and forced marriages and prosecute those evil individuals who carry out so called “honour killings” on family members who refuse to comply with cultural expectations.)

On the other hand, I doubt if any of us really believes that all religions are as good as one another, that every culture is equally valuable, that one person's opinion is always as good as another's. I am sure we are correct to defend people's right to believe and say and, within reason, to behave as they wish. To restrict people's right to express their own ideas is not only oppressive to them; it also deprives us of the opportunity to learn from them. A great deal of scientific, ethical and religious progress has come from a few brave individuals insisting on new ideas which the existing consensus - the existing scientific, political or religious establishment - have regarded as intolerable. The idea that the earth goes round the sun, universal suffrage, and the belief that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself were all once new ideas, espoused initially only by a persecuted minority. If we stifle dissent we not only stifle the dissenters; we rob ourselves of the opportunity to have our horizons broadened by them.

But having said that, some things just are wrong. Certain cultures are worse than others. Slavery is wrong. Torture is wrong. Theft is wrong. Lies are wrong. The taking of innocent life is wrong. And certain kinds of behaviour are better than others. Some kinds of behaviour are right in absolute terms. It is better to give than to receive. It is right to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless and visit the prisoner and the sick. These

are absolute moral values and the behaviour of individuals and the nature of particular cultures must be measured relative to these absolute standards of right and wrong.

We must approach the Truth with the greatest humility. The Truth is not always easy to discern. We are not worthy of the Truth. Yet the Truth fascinates us and draws us towards itself. What we may discern of the Truth is something we are bound to share, but humbly, and with complete respect for those whose vision of the Truth is different from our own.

Without a vision the people perish. If we have no confidence in our values, our faith, our culture, it is hard to see how Christian civilization can survive, but can we have confidence in our beliefs without either living apart from people of other beliefs in some kind of cultural ghetto or else coercing them to live by our values in one homogenous community? Not long after the time of Esther, when the Jews needed to be protected from the intolerance of Haman in order to survive at all as a people within the Persian Empire, they were able to re-establish themselves in the Holy Land as a Jewish state with proper city walls to defend themselves and their own Temple. They very quickly separated themselves from alien cultures – divorcing their foreign wives and forcibly ejecting from the city of Jerusalem those people of other races and religions who tried to trade on the Sabbath day. The Jews knew that their faith and their culture would not survive assimilation.

One of the chilling things about Breivik is that he claims to be a Christian. If, however, he really lived his life in the light of God revealed in Jesus Christ, he would not massacre innocent people in support of his political views – whether those views were right or wrong. Arguments in families get out of hand and people fall out, but surely, nearly always, brotherly love matters more than whatever it is they are quarrelling about. You might be sure that Mum wanted you to have those pearl earrings, but are they really worth never speaking to your sister again over? There are terrible disagreements within churches, but surely Christian unity is nearly always more important than whatever it is we are arguing about – female clergy, hymn tunes, whose turn it is to clean the vestry, whether the Wesley brothers were dangerous Armenians or whatever. In this country we accept that we have political differences, but we normally accept the ballot box as settling the issues until the next election. We don't man the barricades and start a civil war, because preserving the Queen's peace and the rule of law is ultimately more important than whether we have a Conservative, Liberal or Labour Government.

We may have sincere and passionate religious, political or cultural differences with other people, but, as Christians, how we deal with those differences must be determined by our vision of the Truth. The Truth is God. The Truth is revealed in Jesus Christ. God is love. So our differences with one another and our differences with people of other religions and cultures can only be resolved in the light of love. If our conduct towards other people falls short of love, it doesn't matter how right we are concerning the matter we are disagreeing about. If we fail to conduct the debate in love we fail as Christians and we are untrue to the principle which wholly undergirds our religion. If we cannot love our enemies, we undermine the foundation on which we are built. Love is the way through to Truth and the only way – Jesus Christ, the Way the Truth and the Life.