

## FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

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QMU Musselburgh Biblical

### 3) ESTHER AS HERO

....speaking truth to power.

We have considered Esther in her contexts as foreigner and woman, and we have seen other people, in scripture who have had to deal with being the stranger in a settled society, or a woman in a man's world.

Today we look at something which is not specific to either our nationality or our gender, but which is called out in people of faith throughout the scriptures – the need to speak truth to power.

### FAMOUS BIBLICAL HEROES

There are many examples of famous biblical people who have been called to do that:

Moses, the midwife of the Hebrew people, is called upon, despite his speech impediment, to address the Egyptian Pharaoh and demand the liberation of his people.

Elijah famously becomes the *bête noire* of the royal family for exposing their corruption, idolatry and the way they misdirected the nation.

A host of prophets after Elijah, including Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos address the national leaders of the day, directing incisive criticisms regarding their leadership and – certainly in the case of Jeremiah – suffer for it.

But to a certain extent these men spoke from a position of privilege. When we consider Esther, a trophy bride who had never revealed her racial origins and who was little more than a call-girl in a male society, we are dealing with someone very different.

She did not have a startling epiphany like Moses hearing the direct address of God. She was told by her uncle what she had to do for a time like this.

She was not accorded the status of a prophet like Jeremiah, nor did she have his eloquence.

### ESTHER'S SPEECHES

Let us read the part of her story where she speaks truth to power. There are three speeches:

1) Having drawn attention to herself by dressing in her royal robes, the king asks what she wants, and she replies:  
“If it please your majesty, will you come today, my Lord, and Haman with you, to a banquet I have prepared for you?” (5: 4-5)

2) During the banquet, the king offers to give her whatever she requests. She replies: “If I have found favour with your majesty, and if it please you, my Lord, to give me what I want and to grant my request, will your majesty and Haman come again to the banquet that I shall prepare for you both?” (5: 8)

Note: so far she has not said anything very dramatic.

3) During the second banquet the king offers to grant her request for a third time, and she says:

“If I have found favour with your majesty, and if it please you, my lord, what I ask is that my own life and the lives of my people be spared. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed slain and exterminated.

If it had been a matter of selling us, men and women alike, into slavery, I should have kept silence; for then our plight would not have been such as to injure the king's interests.”

The king then asked, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do such a thing?’ and Esther answered, “A ruthless enemy – this wicked Haman.” (7:3-6)

There are 167 verses in the book of Esther. She only speaks in 6 of these.

#### TECHNIQUE?

Does Esther have a technique?

We might compare what she does with the women whom we looked at yesterday.

She is not like the Daughters of Zelophehad who confronted Moses directly with a gross injustice.

Nor is she like the Witch of Endor who, to some extent, makes King Saul accountable and guilty for what he has done.

Nor is she like Rizpah, who says nothing, but whose symbolic action of protest next to the corpses of seven young men who have been needlessly slaughtered convinced David that he has to make reparation.

If anything she is a bit like Jael who uses her womanly persuasiveness... and also some food. Remember how Jael wooed Sisera into a sense of false security by offering him food and lodgings. We can imagine her soft voice saying, 'Come in here, my lord. Come in here, don't be afraid.'

What could be more innocent than the queen inviting the Prime Minister to share a banquet in his honour with the king...and then another banquet...and then another. Esther uses a degree of cunning in order to set up an atmosphere of trust and safety over three meals, and then when it seems the right time she does not make a direct on the king who was persuaded to order the genocide of the Jews.

Rather, perhaps with some naivety in her voice, she says that there is a law which has been passed which will be against the king's interest. For this law means that two people will be killed, people whom he has honoured. One is Mordecai who save the king's life. The other is Esther herself, his wife to whom he has promised half his kingdom. Both of them, she reveals, are Jews.

And then she exposes the villain who framed the legislation – Haman – the initiator of unmerited genocide.

Here we see that to speak truth to power does not require Titans, superheroes, people who have status and influence. It can be the right word said at the right time by those who have no political, military or financial prestige.

And we find this elsewhere in the Bible. It is not an isolated incident.

#### ELISHA AND NAMAN

It is well exemplified in the story of Elisha and Naaman.

Elisha, you may remember is the successor to Elijah as prophet in Israel. And though it is not clearly stated, we have to presume that he has a bit of a reputation as a healer.

We will probably all know this story. It is included in the three year lectionary cycle. But as I read it again, would you listen for the role of the minor characters without whom there would be no story.

Read 2nd K 5: 1-14.

Who spoke truth to power in that story?

A) It was an enslaved girl from Israel who was a domestic servant under the authority of Naaman's wife. The girl said to her that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure Naaman of leprosy.

Without her speaking up, there would have been no visit to the prophet.

B) It was not Elisha, but Elisha's servant who told the king of Israel to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. We are not told why Elisha refused to meet Naaman. It might have been to indicate that he was not a Magic healer, but rather the healing would come from God, so it was best that the personality of the prophet had little to do with it.

But had the servant not acted as a go-between and passed on the message, there would have been no trip to the river.

C) It is another minor character who becomes a major player, It happens when Naaman feels humiliated. He believes that there are better waters than the Jordan in which to bathe.

But then someone of no significance in his entourage, a junior soldier perhaps whose name we do not know, puts a question to the commander which brings him to his senses. If he had been asked to do something difficult, he would have done it. But maybe the cure will happen through something much less complicated than Naaman imagined.

Had the junior soldier not persuaded the commander, there would have been no cure.

Unlike Esther, we don't know the names of the people who enable the curing of Naaman to take place. All we can say is that without them, there would have been no change.

Move into the Gospels and we can find similar instances of people who had no locus, no position in society, no religious prestige, just their basic humanity touching the heart of Jesus and evoking from him a decision to use his power to aid their infirmity or distress.

Take, for example, the Syrophenician woman who is mentioned in both Mark and Matthew.

NOW TURN TO EACH OTHER AND TELL THE STORY. NO LOOKING AT BIBLES. JUST TELL FROM MEMORY.

(CONVERSATION)

Both Matthew and Mark have this story. Mark sets it in a house where there might well have been a meal table spread. Matthew reports it as happening in the open air, and not without drama. As you listen to the story, listen for what you have forgotten..and then talk with each other about the significance of what you didn't remember.

Here is Matthew's account:

Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

And a Canaanite woman from these parts came to meet him crying, 'Son of David! Have pity on me; My daughter is tormented by a devil.'

But he said not a word in reply. His disciples came and urged him:

'Send her away.

Look at how she comes shouting after us.'

Jesus replied, 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone.'

But the woman came and fell at his feet and cried, 'Help me, sir.'

Jesus replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'

'True, sir,' she answered,

'and yet the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the master's table.'

Hearing this, Jesus replied,

'What faith you have! Let it be as you wish!'

And from that moment her daughter was restored to health.

#### (CONVERSATION)

#### TWO REQUESTS FOR POWERFUL INTERVENTION

Here is an interesting situation in which there are two requests for Jesus to use his power. His disciples – good Jewish boys – are clearly not best pleased with this Syrian woman who is making a lot of noise and drawing the wrong kind of attention to them and to herself. They want Jesus to use his powers of persuasion to send her away.

The other call on his power is from the woman herself. She is like a first century Daughter of Zelophehad in challenging a person of power. But unlike the daughters of Zelophehad, this woman is not a Jew.

Jewish custom, if not Jewish Law, prohibited the association of Jewish rabbis with Gentile women. And at this time, Jesus seems to be keen that his primary mission is to his own people. Hence he makes the rather impolite suggestion that you don't take what was meant for the children of Israel and throw it to heathen dogs.

But the woman speaks back to him. She speaks truth to power.

Dogs don't get the children's food, but they can eat scraps from the master's table.

And this moves Jesus....so much so that he congratulates her.

'What faith you have..'

He never says that to his own disciples.

He never once says to Peter, James, John or any of the others, 'What faith you have'. Indeed on more than one occasion he chastises them for their lack of faith. But here is a woman whom he should not be talking to who is challenging Jesus for a response of compassion.

Esther believed that Asahuerus is basically a good man and will change his mind when faced with the true consequences of his decision.

This woman also believed that Jesus needed to see the truth of her desperation that her child should be healed. She changes Jesus' mind. How could he deny his grace when someone from a once enemy nation so fervently puts her trust in him?

## TRUTH AND POWER

When truth is addressed to power, power will do one of two things:

Deny the truth

Or admit the truth and change direction.

## SOUTH AFRICA AND APARTHEID

This is the history of South Africa, a country ruled by the Dutch and the British and a country which so separated black and white under apartheid. Apartheid, we must remember was originally bogus theology which Christian politicians used to underpin a segregated political system. Apartheid was engineered to prevent the white minority hearing the truth of the black majority.

When I visited South Africa two years ago, I met with four Christians of different generations and backgrounds and asked them why they had not -from their understanding of the Christian faith - objected to what was happening to the blacks and respond to their cries.

And these people, much to my astonishment, but with abject honesty, said that they had no idea what was going on. The government so controlled the news that most whites believed the blacks were troublesome.

But when the black population began to organise resistance against the regime in huge demonstrations, the whites could no longer fail to hear them.

In the middle of the very troubled years, Bishop Desmond Tutu was given an audience with Minister Louis le Grange, the Law and Order Minister.

Tutu – who had no political power -knew that for a time such as this God would give him words which would begin to change the perceptions of people across the world, if not the perception of whites in his own country. He said,

'Mr Minister, you are only a man.

You are not a god.

You ought not to attempt to conduct yourself like God.

Your name shall remain in history books as an unidentifiable scribble.

But the name of the Lord of the church shall endure forever.'

## WHY DO WE NOT SPEAK ABOUT POWER?

It seems to me that within our churches we can have discussions about whether children can receive communion, whether divorced people can be re-married in church, what we should do with buildings which are too large for the present congregations, whether we believe that every word in the Bible was dictated by the mouth of the Lord, but we have a great reluctance to speak about power... although in the church as in society it is always present.

When I was a student, I was present at a meeting of leaders of a congregation who were having difficulty finding new lay leaders (Presbyterians call them elders.) There seemed to be no suitable men.

Then someone said, 'Perhaps we should ask a woman to join us.'  
And immediately several other men said, 'But if we go for a woman, how can we guarantee she will be good.'

.....as if any man was automatically a paragon of virtue.

The power of the old boy's network went unchallenged.

But it would be wrong to give the impression that the misuse of power is something which only pertains to men.

In the U.K., most long distance trains have a quiet compartment. It is the one I usually sit in to avoid listening to people speaking on their mobile phones. But on one journey two years ago from England to Scotland, a woman - clearly a business woman - decided that her need to use her phone was more important than the other passenger's desire for silence.

So we all heard what she said. She was clearly phoning a business colleague.

The conversation went something like this:

'Hello Marge, is that you?

Good.

Well, tomorrow we have the meeting at 9.30.

It seems that Peter is going to be there....Yes Peter Jones from Manchester.

I can't stand him.... do you like him? No?

Well, I think it's very important that we don't let him get his way.

I have a much better idea.

Why don't you and I meet for breakfast at 8.30? No one will know.

And we can work out together how to prevent his proposal from getting approval.'

At this point, I look at the woman on the phone... and said, 'Excuse me. I know who you are talking about.'

Actually I had no idea who Peter Jones from Manchester was; I was just annoyed that she was having a private phone call in a public place. But what her phone call showed was that the use and misuse of power is no simply something that men do.

Why is it that we avoid not just speaking truth to power, but avoid speaking about power itself in our churches?

(DISCUSSION)

ACTON'S QUOTE

One of the most famous quotations in the English languages comes from a 19th century politician called Lord Acton who wrote to a bishop:

Power tends to corrupt.  
Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Perhaps still feeling guilty from his own experience as a persecutor of the church Paul made it clear to the Romans that all power belongs to God, and that those who exercise power in church or state have to exercise it according to the mandates of heaven and not the political expedients of earth.

And it may be that in our day those who are most effectively speaking truth to power are not our elected politicians, but younger people who have no personal prestige, but do not want the institutional abuses of power in the present day to make life difficult for the next generations.

One thinks of the Pakistani girl Malala who won the Nobel Peace Prize - a teenager who in the face of the Taliban's disdain for educated women would not be silenced in her commitment to raise the issue of the need to educate girls as much as boys - a magnificent act of defiance within a country which, with or without the Taliban, has no great tradition of gender equality.

Or more recently, we have become aware of the activity of Greta Thunberg, another teenager, appalled at the inability of powerful nations to change policies away from environmental degradation to preventative measures to safeguard the world's delicate ecosystem. She has been fearless in speaking to the wealthiest people in the world and major politicians within Europe.

Thank God that in our lifetime, young people – at least some of them – are being lured away from lives controlled by the limited number of social media giants – Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook, McDonalds, Starbucks, etc. etc.

These are the corporations who make the physical apparatus of cell phones and I-pods, or who advertise on them. Such corporations have budgets in excess of the wealth of small nations. They do not want to give people choice. They want to influence what people will buy, how they will communicate, what they will think.

They are committed to make profit and the ego twin gods at the centre of the universe. And they believe they have the right to tell the rest of the world what to do.

Thank God that a proportion of our young people now recognise that for the future to have a future, they have to challenge the politicians and the mega rich of today to think again about the sorry legacy they are bestowing on future.

Such protest, such passion must feel like a David and Goliath struggle - the little ones, the insignificant, the ones with no money or power against the mega industries and parliaments who have boundless influence and have no desire to have their privilege position compromised.

But in the end of the day,  
it was not Goliath,  
it was not Sisera  
it was not Haman  
and it was certainly not Pontius Pilate who was victorious.

For just as darkness cannot hide from light, power in whatever manifestation has no ultimate protection against truth.

BETTY BROWN AND BILLY BLACK

So I want to end with a positive story about truth being spoken to power. And having alluded to how the power of retired businessmen led to the sacking of a female pastor, this story is about a lay woman who would not be intimidated by an influential Christian man.

I am calling the woman at the centre of this story Betty Brown. And the man who was her adversary I am calling Billy Black. I am using these names because I promised her I would never reveal her identity. But every other detail in the story is true.

When Betty was 19, she went to study law in a small university town in Texas. She made friend very easily and was keen to be part of the town and not just the student community.

She and three male students were intrigued by a notice they read about a public meeting to discuss whether or not the town should issue liquor licences. At that time, the town had no establishment which sold wine, beer or spirits.

It was indicated in the local newspaper that Mr Billy Black, a local lawyer of some distinction would be speaking against this possibility. Mr Black was not only a lawyer; he was the chair of the board of deacons in the 1st Southern Baptist Church in the town. So the students decided they would go to the meeting, and they also did a little background work on Mr. Black.

During it some people said it was time that individuals could buy a bottle of wine or whisky when they wanted it. Others did not agree with them, particularly Mr Black who made a strong defence for the town remaining 'dry' (not having alcohol on sale). Mr Black spoke about how the Bible did not encourage drunkenness and he feared that if people were able to purchase alcohol, there would soon be all manner of lawlessness and degradation in what was at that time a very respectable community.

After Black had spoken, the chairman asked if anyone had any questions.

At this Betty asked why Mr Black was against the issuing of liquor licences when he had licences to sell alcoholic drinks in premises in other towns in the state.

Black was furious. He said that this was fake news. He said that clearly Betty and her friends were trouble makers who had come to Texas with no idea of how to behave. He called them Marxists, socialists. He said that the town had no place for such people who opposed good Christian values. And he demanded that they be thrown out of the town meeting... which they were.

Betty and her friends found a young lawyer and asked if he would defend them. They wanted to sue Billy Black for defamation of character. He had said publicly that they were Marxists and anti Christian. This had been reported in the local newspaper, and it would be bad for their future careers if these accusations were never redressed.

Their lawyer went to see Black's lawyer who said that the students had no case. They had no proof that Mr Black owned liquor licences elsewhere.

But the four students had done their homework and showed Black's lawyers extracts from official documents in other towns which proved that he did indeed own licensed premises elsewhere in the state.

So Black's lawyer went to see his client who was very troubled that the students had found him out. He asked how much they were suing him for, and was told \$3million. He asked if there were any options, and his lawyer told him that he could defend himself by saying that he used intemperate language to the students which he now regretted. But if the proof that the students had regarding his ownership of liquor stores elsewhere in the state was made public, it would be very embarrassing for him, not least as chair of the board of deacons in the 1st Southern Baptist church.

His lawyer also told Black that he thought the students would settle for \$2m. So Black asked him to be discrete and get the matter settled quietly.

Betty and her three friends agreed to take \$2m, but they also indicated they wanted to speak personally to Billy Black. They had done some more research and found that this God-fearing man was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

So when they met him, Betty said that they were glad that he had agreed to a settlement. But the students assured him that they would not be taking a penny of the \$2million.

They said that they knew that the 1st Southern Baptist Church had a very fine organ, one of the best in the state. But they knew that there was a black Baptist church where the organ was in total disrepair, and they thought it would be great to have a new organ installed courtesy of Mr Black's generosity.

There was also in that area a children's playground which was overgrown and disused, and children had nowhere safe or interesting to play, so they wanted some of Mr Black's money to enable children in that impoverished area to have a good and safe environment in which they could enjoy themselves.

And then Betty said,

'Mr Black we are all at University either because we won a bursary or our parents were wealthy enough to send us. We don't see many children of colour at university, because most of them come from poor backgrounds. So we reckon that the first two projects might take up to half a million dollars. And we would like the rest 1.2 million to be set up as the William Black Scholarship for African American children from this town, to help them go to college.'

And finally she asked Black, at the next town meeting, to make a public apology and retract all his false accusations.

When I met Betty, she was in her 60's and a professor of political economy in Oklahoma. But it was not in the university I met her. It was in her local church where she preparing to serve a three course meal to 150 people who were homeless and who came for meal every Friday in the church hall.

The Kingdom of Heaven is advanced by such people who speak truth to power.

Seminar Text by John L. Bell  
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