

Esther 7; Mark 9: 38 – 50

God 'outside the box'

Prayer

Introduction ...

If you're someone who likes storing away information that might come in useful for a quiz ... here's one Question and Answer:

**Which book of the Bible never mentions God? It's the book of Esther.**

This is what one commentator says:

**In the story of Esther God is not even named or known, and yet he acts in human history. The Jewish woman Esther married the pagan king Xerxes (or Ahasuerus) of Persia, and through bizarre circumstances she thwarted Haman's genocidal plot to annihilate the Jews. Yahweh is never mentioned, never seen, and never heard from in the entire book, whereas by one count the pagan king is mentioned 190 times. Further, the plot of this story hinges on intrigue, hatred, deceit and eventual revenge by the Jews who massacred 75,000 of their enemies.**

**Nor is there any mention of the Mosaic law, ritual purity, or the Hebrew sense of justice, mercy, and kindness. For these reasons, the book of Esther has had both Jewish and Christian detractors who objected to its inclusion in the Bible. But every year since then, Jews have observed the Feast of Purim "as the month when their sorrow was turned to joy and their mourning into a day of celebration" (*Esther 9:22*). (Cf. *The Oxford Study Bible, 1991, p. 612*) God was powerfully and providentially at work even though no one ever spoke his name.**

So this book can act as a reminder that God is present and acts outside any box that we might assume are the 'divine limits'.

**Similarly, in Mark's gospel, just *after* arguing about who among them was the greatest (*Mark 9: 33-37*), and just *before* James and John ask Jesus for positions of glory (*10: 35 - 45*), the disciples saw an anonymous healer cast out demons in Jesus' name. This person was unknown to them. He must have been peripheral to the Jesus movement. "He was not one of us," they complained, "so we told him to stop," as if this healer needed their authorization as the sole proprietors of the mission of Jesus. Their presumption and exclusionary attitude was sadly ironic because whereas the disciples had just failed in exorcising demons (*9: 14 - 18*), this healer was successful. No, said Jesus, don't stop them, "for whoever is not against us is for us."**

What learnings might we take from these two readings?

From **Esther** – that God does not always need to be named – and can be present in power without being named.

From **Mark** – I think it is important to note that this 'other someone' was using the name of Jesus – **PTO**

was not against Jesus but the main point is that people may well be contributing to helping the Kingdom of God to grow in our midst without being those that we know or feel comfortable with.

Perhaps in our time this relates to people who talk about following Christian principles without necessarily being able to articulate how those principles relate to Jesus. *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

This has, I think, two consequences for us now – both are about ‘a sense of movement’:

1. How can we join in work that is “Kingdom work” in the town that hasn’t originated in this church – and perhaps not originated in any of the churches of the town? How can we be the salt and light of Christ in such ventures – we have done so in the past – think of the Litter Pick, the Whitchurch Helping Hands or the Blackberry Fair – but what about the future?
2. How can we welcome others to join in what we do for the well-being of this community? Again we have done so in the past – think of the Foodbank, the cleaning of this church building after Covid, Time Together ... But what about the future?

The PCC thought a bit about this last Monday evening ... One thing is clear – that we need to be involved as individuals as well as ‘official church representatives’ in the life of our town and its various groups and to view this as an opportunity to be Christ’s salt and light. Many of us already are – and perhaps we could pray along the lines of “*Lord, grant me the opportunity to both act and speak for you today*”.

**Amen.**

*(Some material taken from Daniel B. Clendenin)*