

Hate won't win

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[0:00] So, we're going to think a bit about this passage. What I've got here really is not so much a detailed exposition, but I think a bit about this passage.

Anybody for handball? Well, I suppose it's always good to take a fresh look at something. But one thing they've taken a fresh look at is the Olympic motto.

Sitius, altius, fortius, faster, higher, stronger. But they've added another word to it, together. However, there's a bit of a tendency at the moment to think in terms of slogans and mottos.

But what does this actually mean? I mean, the Olympics have always been about international friendship. But I do wonder what this revamped motto actually means. I mean, we can't all be the fastest or the strongest, so how is it together?

And if it's about improving just your personal performance, why award medals at all? Actually, of course, anyone who competes in the Olympics does so with the aim of proving that they're the best in the world at what they do.

[1:35] But win or lose, respect for opponents is a key feature. So perhaps that's what's meant by this together. That competition is not one of enmity and sort of arrogance, but rather of respect for one's opponents.

Because if it's not, hate is the true victor. As I say, one frightening aspect of modern life is this tendency to try to solve complex problems by means of slogans, sometimes substituting those for actual debate.

So what about that strapline that the BBC has been using? Hate won't win. Well, I'd like to think that's true, I suppose.

But it seems to me open to at least two objections. First of all, is it just wishful thinking?

What actually is the evidence that hate won't win? I think there are lots of examples in history you could look at where hate does win. Just try telling hate won't win perhaps to the inhabitants of Rwanda or Myanmar, people who have been thrust in their homes by racial hatred.

[2:57] Sometimes hate does win. And the second problem with this sort of slogan is that people who propagate them tend to come across those who disagree with them.

And even if it's a minor way, you find their reaction is rarely restrained. It's the abuse that's been held at people who won't even support this taking the knee at the beginning of operations.

In fact, hate tends just to breed hate in those who set out to oppose it. Whichever side wins the battle, hate is often the victor.

So what did Jesus tell us? Well, he told us to love our enemies.

But how that works out in practice perhaps is not so easy. Does it just apply to individuals or does it apply to governments? Isn't it actually the duty of governments to punish violence and injustice?

[4:12] And it's all very well saying, love your enemies. But what are you going to do when your own children are attacked? When your neighbours are attacked? Will you not defend yourself?

After all, Jesus also said, If you have a purse, take it and also a bag. And if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It's one of the less quoted texts, words of Jesus, I think.

What is he saying there? There's not much point in buying a sword if you're not prepared to use it.

Surely he's saying that it's justifiable to defend yourself if you're attacked. And to defend your family and your loved ones.

Well, hate will not win. We all hope so. But how exactly is hate to be defeated? As we think of Esther in this situation, certainly victim of what was intended as a hate crime. And she wasn't holding a debate on ethics. She wasn't calmly even preparing a political campaign. She was dealing with a crisis. She was making ethical decisions on the fly, as we say.

[5:29] And I think the narrator wants us to meditate on this a bit and just think about this before we get to the final denouement. Phil told me not to use words like that.

Until we get to the final part of the story. Thank you. One thing we might reflect on was, would Esther have heeded Haman's plea for mercy?

Of course, we don't know. But perhaps she was fortunate that the final decision of what to do about that was taken out of her hands by one of the palace officials. Excuse me.

So in this story, we come to the end game. As Brenda was reminding us, the chief baddie, Haman, is actually dead. Impaled, of course, with dark irony.

And there's dark irony all the way through this book. He's impaled on the gallows he'd set up for Mordecai. But the story isn't finished. Because Xerxes' decree still stands.

[6:41] There are still plenty of people who are prepared to take advantage of this decree to get rid of the Jews. It's still written into the records of the law of the Medes and Persians.

And as it said, that cannot be changed. The Persians' empire seemed to have a sort of doctrine of kingly infallibility.

So that once you pass the law, you can't change your mind. It's a bit like some of the problems that the Catholics have when they want to maybe change things.

But they can't do it. So, that's the situation. That law still stands. What will be the outcome?

What is to be done? Well, in short, the outcome, it has to be said, is going to be a lot of people dead. Pretty well all stories about racial hatred end in bloodshed, don't they, one way or another?

[7:46] But we've noted several times, as we've been studying Esther, how you tell the story matters. It's not just reciting the facts. How you tell the story matters.

Haman, remember, was an agagite. And his hatred of the Jews was a result of a centuries-old blood feud. And something that happened centuries ago was going to lead to a massacre in the sense that the hate had been kept alive over all those centuries.

Possibly Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman was for the same reason. Whether it was or not, these things rarely end well. Blood feuds rarely end well. The scene is set for violence.

So how will our narrator tell this violence? Because there's various ways you could do it. We said there is a certain amount of dark humour in this story.

Let's suppose, for instance, Quentin Tarantino had got his hands on this plot. At this point he'd be rubbing his hands with glee, wouldn't he?

[9:01] There's going to be blood everywhere. I'm not sure I'd recommend watching Tarantino's film, Pulp Fiction. But if you have seen it, you'll know what it's about.

There's violence everywhere. Bags and bags of irony. I say, if you ever have seen it, or if you do watch it, then I say I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, but I have seen it, actually, just to see what it was about.

You'll know that it's not only violent and horrific, but it's also very, very funny. Tarantino's the only one who can make you laugh at somebody's head being blown off in the car.

But that's hardly a good way to tell a story, it seems to me, to make violence, something, turn violence into entertainment. Well, I don't suppose the boys and girls would know about Pulp Fiction, but you may know about Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

Yes. But actually, it doesn't do very much the same thing. Isn't the point of this story how various unpleasant people come to, in this case, a literally sticky end?

[10:17] Isn't that the point, actually, of most of the Roald Dahl stories? Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is definitely not sugar-coated, is it? Sometimes, to remove the violence from the story removes the point of the story at all.

You get these Disney versions of Grimm's fairy tales, but you lose half the power of the story, don't you? So how would our narrator deal with this violent ending?

Will we get Tarantino-styled spattered blood? And in fact, the actual description of the violence in Chapter 9 has all the emotion of a military intelligence report.

It's a flat reporting of information. But that's for next week, so I'm not going to talk about that now. Before we get to that, we have this interlude in Chapter 8.

It's a pause for breath. An opportunity to take stock and tie up the narrative at loose ends. If it's about anything, it's about the shifting of the balance of power within the Persian Empire.

[11:34] Before we turn to the lessons of this, let's look at the narrative itself. So in typical Hebrew style, Chapter 8 is a deliberate parallel to Chapter 3.

Let me just point out how the two chapters are closely related. I don't know quite how you do this with an iPhone, but if you've got an old-fashioned paper Bible, you can keep one finger in Chapter 3 and one finger in Chapter 8.

So first of all, we notice there's a formal appeal to the king. Haman makes such an appeal in Chapter 3, Verses 8 and 9, and of course, Esther makes a similar appeal in Chapter 8, Verses 3 to 5.

Although they're very different in style. But they are. The formal appeal is made to the king. We're told about the royal messengers. There's quite a lot of detail about the royal messengers in Chapter 3, 15, and in Chapter 8, 14.

These royal messengers, of course, were the internet of their day. That's the rapid way to spread news about the empire, throughout the empire. The Lord is made of the king's signet ring, and it's wearer.

[12:53] In Chapter 3, Verse 10, the ring is given to Haman. In Chapter 8, Verse 2, it's passed on to Mordecai. Well, why is such a fuss, as it were, made of the signet ring?

Well, because that is the symbol of royal power. The person who had that ring, effectively, had the power of the throne behind him. This is the transfer of power.

Of course, the decree itself is repeated in Chapter 3, Verse 9. There we have Haman's decree. In Chapter 8, Verse 8, we have Mordecai's decree.

Racism is a live issue here. And just to emphasize the point, we have mention of the diverse languages and ethnic groups of the empire.

That's repeated in Chapter 3, Verse 12, and it's repeated again in 8, Verse 9. Obviously, the crucial date, when it's all going to happen, is repeated, Chapter 3, Verse 13, and Chapter 8, Verse 12.

[14:03] We also get reference to the women and children, the families. It's mentioned in 3.13 and in 8.11. There are no non-combatants in this battle.

The women and children will be killed and the women and children must be defended. And what I think is most interesting at all, the narrator has to be a politician because he makes this point of the reaction of the political elite, the city of Susa, where all the staff of the government, all the civil servants live.

In Chapter 3, Verse 15, we're told they were bewildered. In Chapter 8.15, we're told they had a party. They rejoiced.

I quite like this list of things. This is bureaucracy at its best, isn't it? No loose end left untied. Everything that Haman did is carefully unraveled and set aside.

So Chapter 8 reruns Chapter 3 in one sense, but it does so with a totally different vibe, doesn't it? If you think about the formal appeal to the king, for instance, Haman's plea is based on arrogance and hate.

[15:39] Esther's plea is a matter of humility and love for her own people and indeed even respect for the king. And we do notice, actually, that the degree of provocation matters.

I think that's maybe something important. She says, if I and my people had been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation, if we'd been merely sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet.

Of course, no such distress would justify disturbing the king. But Haman's decree was a license for genocide. And of course, violence is addictive.

If Haman had succeeded in eliminating the Jews, who would have been the next target? In a pluralist culture, in a diverse culture like the Persian Empire, you can always find someone to hate, don't you?

Once the Jews were out of the way, then Haman would have found somebody else to hate. Violence spreads. Hate spreads. You'll notice that, by contrast, Mordecai's decree is very limited. [16:51] It simply gives the permission for the Jews to defend themselves against attack. They're only allowed to kill those who attack them. And actually, that's quite important.

For it gave those undecided a chance to pick a side, didn't it? It gave them a chance to think, to reflect. Did they really want to indulge in this genocide?

And many of them, perhaps because they saw which way the wind was blowing, but many of them decided they didn't. They had a chance to reflect and step back. Haman had planned this 11-month delay, of course, for the forces of hate to get themselves organized.

And that's exactly what... But Mordecai used that time, that delay, to give people space to reflect. And this is exactly what they did, verse 17.

Free from the threat of violence, propaganda, and coercion, people decided that maybe their Jewish neighbors weren't so bad after all. Hate was deflected.

[18:00] But as I say, I particularly like these references to the civil servants, to the palace officials in the citadel in Susa.

Because those in the palace already knew this. We've previously noted that Esther's entourage remained loyal to her and did not betray her. That's surprising in itself.

You would have thought that Haman would have had spies. But Esther had got the palace officials on her side in the course of her humility and consideration for others.

Chapter 2, Mordecai had foiled a plot against the king. And we saw in chapter 7, verse 9, how Harbona stepped into an awkward situation to ensure the right outcome.

Harbona wasn't a Jew or even one of Esther's servants. But she was very clear about who he would like to see in charge. If you like, a vote for Esther and Mordecai was a vote for wise government and moderation in the time of a rather unstable king.

[19:15] Xerxes' previous advisors had given dodgy advice right back at the beginning of the book when Queen Vashti was banished.

They said, this day, the very day, the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

That's chapter 1, verse 18. And in a sense, of course, they were partly right. But the way Esther behaved gave the light of that, didn't she? She certainly didn't let her husband's actions go unchallenged.

She couldn't do that. There was too much at stake. But she did it with respect. In fact, she did it, you notice, even with undeserved respect. To be honest, the king didn't really deserve her respect, and yet she treated him with respect all the way through the story.

And so the discord was kept to an unavoidable minimum, and hate wasn't allowed to win. There was some understandable fear of the new regime in chapter 8, 17, but basically to have Haman running things would invite bewilderment among those in the know, as we read in chapter 3, verse 15.

[20:40] But for Esther and Mordecai to be in charge was actually a moment for celebration. Hate had indeed been defeated, and the unity of the empire perhaps was strengthened.

So let's return to the questions we started with. Why does Anator spin the tale this way? What does he want us to learn? Well, perhaps it's the need to oppose evil but to do it in a principled and measured way because otherwise the cure is likely to be worse than the disease.

People need time to reflect and to think. You shouldn't be bulldozed and coerced. We can't solve complex moral problems by mouthing slogans.

So much nowadays, so much debate, so-called debate nowadays is just that. You mouth a slogan and if somebody dares to question it, there's a torrent of abuse on the internet or on the press.

can't solve problems by treating opponents with scorn and by suppressing debate. This no platforming should be anathema in a plural democratic society.

[22:11] When I was a student, there was a left-wing speaker who was banned from our student union and I didn't agree with what he said at all.

Of course, I was never a radical lefty. But the whole union came out and said, no, you can't ban him. He should have freedom of speech. He should be allowed to express his opinion.

And there was a sit-in, probably the biggest sit-in Manchester had ever had. Of course, you can't have the university banning suppressing freedom of speech.

And yet nowadays, it seems that both the student union and the university authorities often collude in suppressing freedom of speech and no platforming cannot be a thing that we should support.

Because if this goes on, hate will indeed win. Whatever side comes out on top, whoever wins the argument, hate will be the victor. how should we react as Christians to this unhealthy trend?

[23:21] Do we have anything specific to say as Christians into this situation? And I think we do. There are times when we must speak. Folly must be opposed.

But we should do it, copy Esther, and do it with humility and respect. Well, do we award Esther and Mordecai the gold medal?

They didn't manage to avoid the violence totally, but they did contain its impact. They prevented the empire from being drowned in a sea of bloodshed.

But you could say that perhaps they lacked the advice that Jesus would give on this subject, and that's perhaps where we can make, Christians can make a real contribution to the debate.

But we need to think, even love your enemies can be made into a slogan, can't it? Beatles sang, all you need is love. What does that actually mean?

[24:30] What does it actually mean? Love is not enough, not in that sense. We need to think about what Jesus actually said. Let me read to you Luke 6, 27-32.

I tell you who hear me, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also.

If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

Do to others as you would them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. I don't think this is a command not to seek justice.

Sometimes we need to seek justice for the good of everybody. The Hamans of this world, the Hitlers and the Stalins, must be opposed. even if they dress themselves up as sheep and claim the moral high ground, which they often do.

[25:46] But loving your enemies is about not meeting hate with hate, not meeting violence with violence, lies with lies and insults with insults.

What Jesus taught is the answer to the blood feud, to always seek the peaceful solution. if you possibly can, as Peter said, as far as it lies with you, live peacefully with all men.

It's not saying we should never oppose tyranny and bad government, I'm sure, but it's to do so with respect, putting up with insults for the sake of peace.

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. then your reward will be great and you will be children of the most high, because he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be merciful, just as your father is merciful. Christian plea, it was always a plea for mercy, to promote peace as best we can, to do what has to be done, and sometimes things have to be done to oppose tyranny, to oppose dangerous doctrines and dangerous things in the political arena.

[27:14] But we need to do it, treating our opponents with respect.

Forgiveness and mercy is the end game for a Christian.

traits conspicuously missing in much of today's woke posturing. That's the thing that really upsets me, personally, about what you get together.

Somebody may have said something unfortunate 20 years ago, and it will all be dragged up, even if they apologise and say, well, I've changed my mind on this. It's all dragged up again. It's ridiculous.

I mean, who is squeaky clean? Who can say, as Jesus said, that one who's without sin casts the first stone? It's pure hypocrisy, and needs to be spoken against, but needs to be spoken against in a way that does not promote violence and discord.

Christians, I think, can make a significant contribution with the words of Jesus towards peace, if we take it seriously and do so wisely.

[28:21] So, Esther and Mordecai played out the end game. So, you can judge whether they did the best that was possible. Certainly, they managed to contain the violence and hate that was abroad.

Let us have the same attitude in the society where we find ourselves. They found themselves in a mixed society, and so do we. Let's pray for the peace of the city.

If we forget to do that, hate will certainly win. So, let's remember, even though, as Brenda said, the name of God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, yet all the way through, it's clear that Mordecai and Esther know that salvation belongs to our God.

So, let's finish our time together by singing, salvation belongs to our God. desde! desde! desde!
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