

For such a time as this...

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Hello and welcome to our pre-recorded evening service for Sunday the 4th of July.! This service is brought to you by Calvary Church Brighton. My name is Steve Ellacott and I'm one of the Deacons.

We're slowly moving out of lockdown but our evening worship is still online and this is pre-recorded. If you're a virtual visitor you can get in touch via our website. So let's turn firstly to prayer.

Father as we come to you, we come to you at a time of trouble in our world and we come seeking not so much comfort as wisdom. As we study the ancient history of your people in scripture, may we gain insight into the way your providence is still at work today and understand how the kingdom of the Lamb is being brought forth in our time.

Father, we praise you for our holiness and we acknowledge that even in this pandemic, it's only your just judgment on a sinful world. We pray that peoples might learn the lesson and turn and seek you again.

We thank you that the evil is restrained and that in mercy you provided an escape through these vaccines. We bring before you those throughout the world who are fighting to end this suffering and may the vaccine soon be available to everyone.

[1:24] We ask that you will give those the medical team success. We remember the suffering that Jesus endured for us. We pray that in this dark time, Jesus will be glorified.

We pray for our other needs as a church, particularly the need for future ministry, as Pastor Philip wishes to step back. We acknowledge our need of your help. At the same time, we thank you for the service that Philip has given to you and the church over many decades and continues to give now.

We thank you that we've been able to reopen our Sunday morning meetings. Father, we pray that you will bless this new beginning. We pray for our sister churches in Brighton.

We remember particularly New Life Brighton as it enters a new partnership with the Grace Baptist. We lift up to you every church in our city that seeks to hold out the light of life in a dark time.

May the message of Jesus Christ shine out. Lift our hearts up to you now as we meditate, sing and study your word. Bless our time together and may we be like that tree planted by the water that gives fruit in due season.

[2:36] We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen. Previously, when I spoke for an evening service, we were studying Psalms.

And I took some time to talk about the importance of song to our cultural identity. Now we are studying Esther. And it seems appropriate to say a few words about the importance of story. Esther is written by a master storyteller, possibly Mordecai himself, but certainly someone who understands the power of narrative. And the first point we need to make is that all stories are myths. That doesn't mean they're untrue. In fact, this is true whether they are fact or fiction. Stories are myths in the sense that the stories we tell about ourselves are the way we construct our cultural identity, whether it is as a nation or as a church or even as an individual.

Take as an example a story everyone knows, Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. At first sight, this is just a frivolous fairy tale. But when we get into it, we realise it's far more than that.

[3:47] It's a powerful morality tale about the dehumanising effect of greed and the redemptive power of the spirit of Christmas. Even though the explicitly Christian elements of Christmas are not really visible in the story, the possibility of redemption and change is central to the narrative.

So powerful is this story that Charles Dickens has been called the man who invented Christmas. But the mythic power of fiction enables the writer to impose his own spin on the world. Another well-known Dickens story classic is *Oliver Twist*, which paints the Victorian workhouse as a kind of prison. And indeed, this view has entered our cultural consciousness. In reality, the workhouse regime was certainly harsh, but not as black as Dickens described it. Workhouses kept the poor from starvation, provided them with medical treatment, and often rehabilitated the residents into society.

They were certainly not an ideal solution, but they weren't the living hell that's somehow painted in the Dickens story.

[5:00] When we come to history, the narrator of the story is, of course, or at least should be, constrained by the historical facts. Unfortunately, sometimes the myth takes over from the reality.

The Scottish folk hero Rob Roy is a good example of this. Rob Roy certainly existed, but he was hardly the Robin Hood character he has often painted. Of course, Robin Hood himself has the advantage that he probably didn't exist.

So his myth is not constrained by the objection. My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with facts. But too often historians edit history to force it into a simplistic ideological straitjacket. Some histories of the Reformation do this. They're fiercely pro-Protestant or pro-Catholic, as if all the advocates of one side were impeccably beyond criticism and all the other advocates of the other side demonic.

Of course, the real world is always more complex than that. And we see the same thing in our day. It's postmodern ideology of critical race theory, which interprets power structures as bastions of white privilege.

[6:14] This seems to be a similar ideological straitjacket. Of course, there is some truth in the theory, but it's an absurd oversimplification. It's Marxism reimaged, replacing class struggle with ethnic struggle.

Ultimately, such doctrines become self-defeating. Tell the white majority that they are uniquely privileged, and they're likely to move to protect that privilege.

If they are as evil as the teaching makes out, why would they want to change it? The whites, after all, are a majority in the UK, and this is a democracy.

In fact, critical race theory is thoroughly divisive. But having said that, this is not to say that the job of the historian is simply to establish the facts.

The historian will always interpret the facts, and that's only right. This is what gives the story its power. The narrator of *Esther* is certainly not neutral.

[7:18] He's obviously pro-Jewish. He aims to show that in this context, at least, God is on the side of the Jews. But in presenting the facts, albeit as a powerful story, we are able to examine the myth and see if we agree with it.

We are not being presented with a fiction presented as truth. Rather, we are being shown an interpretation of the truth, and invited to make that interpretation our own.

That is the path to wisdom. Not to accept uncritically, but instead to understand. So before we turn to our study, let us ask the question of ourselves, as we sing the hymn number 854 in our Praise Hymn Book.

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?

Who will serve the King? Who will be his helpers otherwise to bring? Who will leave the world's side?

[8:35] Who will face the throne? Who is on the Lord's side? Who for him will go?

I will pour your mercies. I will praise the throne. We are on the Lord's side, Savior, all your own. Jesus, you have brought us, not with gold or gem, but with your own lifeblood for your dire death. With your blessing filling, all who come in need. You have made us willing, made us free indeed. By your great redemption, by your grace alone, we are on the Lord's side, Savior, all your own.

[10:00] For the King's own army, none can overthrow.

For the King's own army, none can overthrow.

For the King's own army, any need. For the King's own army, any need. For the King's own army, any need. For the King's own army, any need. Injury is secure For His truth unchanging Makes the triumph sure Joy for the endless days By Your grace and grace alone We are on the Lord's side, Savior Of Your own Chosen to be soldiers In our hostile land Chosen cold and faithful For our captains and In His service royal

Let us not grow cold Let us then be loyal Step us true and bold Master, You will keep us As I Your grace and grace alone Always on the Lord's side, Savior For Your grace and grace alone So our passage today is Esther chapter 4 But just to give it a context I will read a few verses From chapter 3 first of all And then we'll read chapter 4 Just through into the beginning of chapter 5 So Esther chapter 3 Starting at verse 8 Then Haman said to King Xerxes

There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom Who keep themselves separate Their customs are different from those of all other peoples And they do not obey the king's laws It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them If it pleases the king Let a decree be issued to destroy them And I will give 10,000 talents of silver to the king's administration for the world treasury So the king took his signet ring from his finger And gave it to Haman son of Hamadathah the Agagite The enemy of the Jews Keep the money, the king said to Haman And do with the people as you please So starting now in chapter 4 verse 1 When Mordecai learned of all that had been done He tore his clothes Put on sackcloth and ashes And went out into the city Wailing loudly and bitterly But he went only as far as the king's gate

[13:31] Because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it In every province to which the edict and order of the king came There was great mourning among the Jews With fasting, weeping and wailing Many lay in sackcloth and ashes When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants Came and told her about Mordecai She was in great distress She sent clothes for him to be put on instead of his sackcloth But he would not accept them Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her And ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city In front of the king's gate Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him Including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the world treasury For the destruction of the Jews He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict For their annihilation

Which had been published in Susa To show to Esther and explain it to her And he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence To beg for mercy And plead with him for her people Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai All the king's officials and the people of the world provinces know That for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court Without being summoned The king has but one law That they be put to death Unless the king extends the gold scepter to them And spares their lives But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai He sent back his answer Do not think that because you are in the king's house You alone of all the Jews would escape For if you remain silent at this time Relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place

But you and your father's family will perish And who knows but that you have come to your royal position For such a time as this Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai Go gather together all the Jews who are in Susa And fast for me Do not eat or drink for three days Night or day I and my attendants will fast as you do When this is done I will go to the king Even though it is against the law And if I perish I perish So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions On the third day Esther put on her war robes And stood in the inner court of the palace in front of the king's hall The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall facing the entrance And when he saw Queen Esther standing in the court He was pleased with her And held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter

So we'll cease the reading there Or we'll get too much into the excitement of the story So then as we come to chapter four of Esther We arrive at the critical point in the narrative As William Cooper wrote Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain God is his own interpreter And he will make it plain But perhaps you prefer to tell the story as our narrator does With the hand of God clearly there But hidden If so then it's time to roll out the clichés When the going gets tough the

tough get going This is the pivotal moment The moment of no return Burn your bridges Esther No retreat Bring it on Just watch how the narrator builds the tension With all the panache of a Hollywood blockbuster The cliffhanger And the citadel in confusion So what's the story so far? Esther has been installed as queen Before the main narrative gains pace Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king And exposes the culprits But then Haman plots against the Jews And scams Xerxes Into issuing a decree for their destruction So chapter three finishes with the classic cliffhanger Haman and Xerxes are best buddies Should all the civil servants in the city of Susa Forsee disaster?

[18:08] Is it curtains for the Jews? Meanwhile back at the palace Esther is living a comfortable life Surrounded by loyal attendants and friendly officials She's in regular contact with Mordecai Who acts as her mentor Up to now she's had only a minor role in events She's kept quiet and meekly fitted into palace life But all that is about to change The action of this chapter Is probably just a matter of hours A few days at most But in that short time span Not only Esther's life But Esther herself is transformed As dramatically as for Moses or Gideon Or even David She's about to be thrust into the eye Of the political storm How will she measure up?

Or cometh the hour cometh the woman With the touch of a master storyteller In chapter four The narrator describes Esther's metamorphosis From pampered girl to a strong decisive woman By God's providence Esther is in the right place at the right time She is God's chosen instrument For such a time as this But she has to shape up In this short passage Esther is changed From queen in name To a queen in truth Like all the Jews Mordecai Up to now the cautious And competent politician Is in distress Disasters at hand He comes to the gate of the palace But he can't get in Dressed in mourning clothes This is the man on whom Esther had always relied The one who'd always known what to do In the crisis The news comes to Esther In verse four And causes her deep distress How will she react?

And it has to say She doesn't We said She doesn't start off well In fact Her first ploy Is to try to get Mordecai Into the palace She sends him a clean suit As if his mourning clothes Were the result Of a sudden attack of poverty But of course Mordecai Is not having it He's too distressed To play political games Is Esther really Completely ignorant Of what is going on And thinks her mentor Has just fallen on hard times?

Or maybe she hoped To get him into the palace Away from the general Jewish panic So that she could save At least him But either way This response was useless And Mordecai Will have none of it Now it's time For Esther To act Think Esther Think And then in verse five Esther begins to think She can't go out Of the palace Herself But that doesn't mean She has no resources For what political Intelligence She's needed Up to now She's relied On Mordecai Without him She's politically Blind and deaf But it doesn't Have to be like that She can't afford To remain ignorant To keep her head down A storm is coming Which could sweep Them all away So she turns To her attendants Previously They'd just been A source of palace Gossip But they can be Employed as an Intelligence network In a game of thrones Understanding the Situation is key It is by wisdom That kings And queens Rule And so Hathak is sent out To Mordecai And reports back With all the details Think Esther Think what will You do Well there is A problem Esther is still Uncertain whether She can actually Help She can't just Walks into the King And make her Demands Vashti was punished For not coming When summoned But to enter The king's presence Uninvited Was to risk death So Mordecai Gives his final Piece of advice Do not think That because You are in The king's house You alone Of all the Jews Will escape For if you Remain silent At this time Relief and Deliverance For the Jews Will arise From another Place But you

[22:37] And your Father's Family Will perish And who Knows But you Have come To royal Position For such A time As this Esther Chapter 4 Verses 14 We see That the narrator Possibly Mordecai Himself Goes out Of his Way To avoid Saying Salvation Is of The Lord Salvation Will come Esther Is told From Another Place From Where From Whom By What Agency You Know Esther Think Fill In The Blank But Like Joseph Like Moses Before Her She Is the One In The Foreign Palace She Is the Only One Who Has Power To Act This Is Your Moment Esther Your Moment To Decide Compromise And Accommodation Is

No Longer Possible Palace Comfort Must Be Set Aside As One Of

God's People It's Time To Put Your Life On The Line So Mordecai's Words Hit Home She's Far From Sure Of The Outcome But Now She Is Sure Of Her Duty And So The Whole Dynamic Changes This Is The Last Time That Mordecai Tells Esther What To Do Now It Is Esther Who Calls For A Fast Identifying With And Joining Her People Carpe Diem Esther Sees The Day And Sees It She Does First She Calls The People To Join People To Three Days Of Fasting She And Her Entourage Will Join Mordecai In Mourning And Then She Will Take The Risk Put Her Life On The Line As Queen It Is Her Duty To Offer Her Life For Her People But In Fact Her Life Will Not Be Required Of Her She Is Not The One Required To Sacrifice Her Life For The People She Is Not The Spotless Lamb Who Gives Her Life For The Sins Of The People That Role Was Prepared For Another But Still Esther Foreshadows It There Will Be One Who Really Gives His Life For The People But Esther Does Have A Key Part To Play In Salvation History And From Now On She Will Play The Game Of Thrones With A Master's Touch Our Narrator Neatly Encapsulates The Role Reversal Back In Chapter Two We Read But Esther Had Kept Secret Her Family Background And Nationality Just As Mordecai Had Told Her To Do For She Continued To Follow Mordecai As Instructions As She Had Done When He Was Bringing Her Up But Now In 4:17 The Dynamic Changes Now It

Is Esther Who Makes The Moves From Chapter Five Onwards We See Esther Under God's Providence As A Master Of Paris Politics She Takes The Calculated Risk Without Being Foolhardy She Exploits The Weaknesses Of The King And Of Haman While Not Compromising Her Own Integrity The Battle Is At Hand Esther Bringing It On The Going Has Indeed Got Tough And The Girl Has Got Going So What Are We To Make Of This Story It's A Short Passage But An Important One What Are We Meant To Make Of It And Surely The First And Primary Lesson Is That Opposition To God's People Is Inevitable But That God Intervenes To Protect Them Salvation Will Come From Somewhere Sometimes He Does It With An Extraordinary Intervention But Most Often He Does It Through The Ordinary Processes Of What Can We Learn From Esther Herself What Can We All Emulate To Be More Effective Disciples How Is Esther A Role Model For Us Clearly We Need To Do This With Caution We Should Not Assume That Everything Esther Did Was A Good Example To Be Copied Esther Was A Redeemed Sinner Just Like The Rest Of Us She Was Human With Human Fallibility But

[27:40] If We Examine Esther As God's Chosen Instrument We Can Analyse What Made Her An Effective Weapon In His Hand And Indeed What Needed To Be Discarded And From That We Can Learn To Be More Effective Disciples And Of Course The First Thing She Had To Discard Was Her Life As A Pampered Courtesan Jesus Taught Us It Was Almost Impossible For A Rich Man To Enter The Kingdom And Yet Esther Made It She Had To Move From Concubine To Queen In Reality As Well As In Her Palace Status Of Course Even In Her Early Life God Was Preparing Her Her Teachability And Meekness Earned Her Not Just The Wisdom Of Mordecai But The Affection And Loyalty Of The Palace Staff So When The Crunch Came She Had Those Around Her Who She Could Trust Unlike Mordecai

Who Doubted In The People Planning An Assassination No One Betrays Esther To Haman He Must Have Had His Spies But They Did Not Succeed In Finding Out What Was Going On Esther Was Meek And Teachable But She Was Certainly Not Indecisive Jesus Tells Us Doesn't He To Be Both Wise As A Serpent And In As A Dove In Matthew 10:16 That early integrity served Esther well, but she had to grow up into it.

As Paul writes, Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants, but in your thinking, be adults. That's 1 Corinthians 14:20.

Once Esther started to think, she immediately appreciated the need to understand what was going on. In Revelation, we are warned the following.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666. Notice in this passage that we're told to calculate the number of the beast.

[30:06] It is not some weird guesswork or divination. But it rather tells us to understand the nature of the society in which we operate, and the power of the forces behind it.

The citadel of Sousa might not be a typical society, but it was where Esther found herself, and she came to understand it well.

Our society might look very different, but as the French say, the more it changes, the more it's the same thing. Once Esther understands that society properly, she can use it.

At first she uses her position to send Mordecai a new suit. But that was pointless. As I've quoted once before, if you can keep your head when all around are losing theirs, you probably don't understand the situation.

Esther didn't understand the situation at first. But she was wise enough to realise the need for information and employ the tools she had to get it. She had no problem with employing Hathak as her personal intelligence officer.

[31:19] And she obviously picked the right man, who we see in verses 9 to 12 that he does the job very well. A secure line of communication is established between herself and Mordecai and the other Jews.

She's caught unaware once, but she won't be caught again. Once she understands, she can act with purpose. She does command a three-day fast, as the threat would seem to demand.

She doesn't take it lightly, going bull-headed and as if there's no problem. But neither does she give way to fear. Perhaps she needs that three-day fast to get her head in the right place.

She understands the risk, she spelled it out in verse 11, that she perhaps needed to come to terms with it. But as Mordecai pointed out in verse 12, as one of God's people, she really has no choice but to put her life on the line.

And it turns out she's up for it, verse 16. So for three days she rests in ashes and mourning. Three days is always a significant time in redemption history.

[32:34] Then on the third day she puts aside her mourning. She puts on her finery and she goes to the king. She doesn't appear in sackcloth. She uses the resources she had to make her approach.

Now the battle is joined, the game is on. And we're going to watch a master player at work. But that's the next chapter.

So you have to come back next week for that. But meanwhile, let's sing together. Trouble may break with the dawn. Hymn 879 in our hymn books, which reminds us that God stands at his people's side, even when it's not obvious.

Hymn 879. Trouble may break with the dawn.

And evil may come. And darkness will fall. And darkness will fall. Clouds will appear in the sky.

[33:56] And tears in our eyes. And pain in the soul. But God stands at his people's side.

Gives them a place to hide. Rescues and saves them. Takes them to heaven. And in his own design, He brings them home.

He brings them home. Sin may take hold in our lives.

And Satan draw near to fear us with fear. Conscience, accuse and condemn.

For things we've done wrong. And silence us all. But God sends us all.

[35:07] But God sends us all. Sending his son to save. Raising him from the grave.

Pardons us in. Bring us us in. Bring us us within. And gives us a course to sing. To sing again.

So join in this new song today. Rejoice in the Lord.

And come and adore. This glorious God of all grace.

Look into his face. And worship him more. For God sets all his people free.

[36:15] Opens their eyes to see. Wonders of love in Jesus above. He's sitting enthroned on high.

For you and me. For God sets all his people free.

Opens their eyes to see. Wonders of love in Jesus above. He's sitting enthroned on high.

For you and me. So then let us finish our time this evening.

By that prayer from Psalm 80 verse 19. Let's pray. Restore us, O Lord God Almighty. Make your face shine upon us.

[37:21] That we may be saved. Amen. May God bless you all at this difficult time. Amen.