

D-Day: God Saves His People

A Sermon on Esther 7:1-10¹

As I worked on this sermon, I was under the stark awareness that I was doing so in the context of D-Days. I did the actual preparation on Monday morning, June 6 – the 50th anniversary of D-Day, the day the Allied forces crossed the British Channel with over 6,000 boats and many planes to carry over 170,000 soldiers to land on the French Normandy coast. That morning I listened to the BBC 6 AM broadcast and it concentrated on those anniversary celebrations. D-Day – the term was a military code for the secret campaign under preparation scheduled for June 6, 1944. It was a huge undertaking even by today's standards. The importance of it was not that it spelled the immediate end of World War II, but it cast the die. It was the day the tide turned against Germany and victory was now sure, even though the war was to continue for another year.

I well remember that end. I was a seven-year old boy in a Dutch village and remember the Allied troops as they came with their tanks and guns with the Germans and their Dutch collaborators running for their lives. Our village celebrated their new freedom for two weeks straight. For a seven-year old, two weeks is a very long time and I was coming to the conclusion that all of life is one big party! I'm afraid I know better now.

That D-Day is history. However, while preparing this sermon I was also deeply aware that it was to be preached on June 11, 1995, one day before a potential D-Day for Nigeria. We all realize the importance of this day. That's why St. Piran's turned this into a week of prayer. I asked myself, "Will I even have a chance to preach this sermon? Or will there be a national curfew to curb all public activities, including church services? Or will there be *war*? Or will the Government bow to pressure and hand over? For what kind of situation was I to prepare this Jewish D-

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Day sermon on Nigeria's own D-Day? Or should I even make two sermons and pick the one that will be most appropriate today?"

It is, I am sure, no accident that the Lord guided the preparation of this present series on Esther in such a way as to have the one on Chapter 7 coincide with the June 12 weekend, a D-Day for Nigeria. This chapter itself is the climax of the book of Esther. It is the D-Day point in the story. It is the point where the decisive event takes place that determines the direction for the remaining chapters. After this chapter, there is no doubt as to the final outcome, even though the details are not yet sure.

This chapter opens with Esther, the King and Haman at a private banquet – the second banquet, you may remember. The first one took place in Chapter 5. Esther arranged that dinner in order to talk to the King about the plot Haman had engineered to destroy her people. But at that time she sensed that somehow the occasion was not right to bring it to the King. So, she invited the two for another banquet on the following day. At that time, she promised the King, she would tell him what was on her heart.

Between that first and second banquet certain things took place that helped prepare the ground for Esther to state her problem. In Chapter 6 Mordecai is honoured in a special way for having saved the life of the King. That's going to be helpful to her case.

And so, here they are, the three of them around the table. At the appropriate time, when the chitchat is beginning to slow down and the after-dinner drink is being served, the King opens the subject once again, "What is it you want? Even if half the kingdom, I will give it to you." That, of course, was only a manner of speaking. Esther was not expected to make such an outrageous demand. It was not to be taken literally. In Mark 6 Herod promises his daughter half of the kingdom, but all she asks for is the head of her mother's enemy. It merely means: "Don't be bashful. Speak your mind. I will listen and be sympathetic to your need." In our story, the king uses the same phrase twice in Chapter 5 when he encourages Esther to feel free to speak her mind.

Esther tells the king that her life and that of her people are threatened: "Grant me my life and spare my people." Ah, the life of his beloved queen in danger? And her people? Who are they? Remember in Esther 2:10 we are told she did not tell the King about her Jewish background. So, he did not know which people she was talking about.

Neither did the king ask which people were in danger. He loved his beautiful queen and his concern was basically very personal: he would punish anyone who dared to endanger his favourite possession, his beautiful queen. Neither did he ask why this was so. The only thing he asked was: "Who is this person who dares to do such a thing?" Who dares to touch his possession? Who dares to threaten his pride and joy? Who dares to interfere with his good times in bed? Never mind the identity of her people. Never mind the causes for this threat. Perhaps, it was justified. No attempt to find out. Just: "Who dares to touch me and my thing?"

Esther notices the immediate effect on the king. He gets angry. He is likely influenced by wine once again. And instead of following appropriate procedures for such an accusation, she notices he is prepared to take immediate hasty action. She knows him well. She knows the effect of drink on him just as in the case of the Vashti story. And so she boldly points her finger at the other guest, Haman. That's the person! He it is that is threatening your sex life. He it is that is endangering the life of your pride and joy.

The king was enraged. Throughout the book of Esther there is the emphasis on the king's personal emotions. Every time he is angry, something drastic is bound to happen. That's how Haman realized immediately that his fate was sealed and he was understandably terrified.

While the king was out of the room in the garden, Haman tried to save himself by pleading with Esther for mercy. How the mighty had fallen. He who had planned her death and that of her people was on his knees before her pleading. In his desperation, he forgot all proprieties. Just as the king came back into the room, Haman had flung himself on the queen's couch in a way that looked very suspicious. That, of course, enraged the king even more. "What, will he even molest her in my own house?" That was too much.

The servants immediately realized the unspoken decision the king had made and they needed no further encouragement or instruction. Haman was to be killed. And they apparently disliked him enough that they were glad to help the process along. So, they covered his face, a way of showing a person had been condemned to death. They even volunteered the information about the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai.

The rest of the chapter moves quickly. The king orders him to be hanged on his own gallows. Once he was hanged, the king's anger subsided, a sign of peace in the kingdom.

D-Day – the real decision had fallen. From here on, the story goes on to relate how the Jews were saved from destruction. Their *enemies* were destroyed instead. First, in the person of their chief enemy, Haman, and later others as well.

This story is about Jews and their representatives. These Jews were a special people with a special relationship to God. That relationship was called the “*covenant*.” It went way back to Abraham with whom it was originally established. It included a promise on the part of God to be their God, to protect them, to have the Saviour of the world emerge from among them and to have them become a blessing to all the nations of the world. That was God's promise to them.

That covenant coin also had another side to it. That was the side of the people of Israel, who were to obey Him, and be faithful to Him. He would be faithful to His promise, He assured them, but if they did not live up to their end of it, then He would withdraw His blessings from them. But His *main* interest in them was not to punish but to save them, to bless them, to rescue them, and to bless all the world through them.

We see in this story the God of the covenant protecting His people from their enemy. God is not mentioned in the story. He does not have to be mentioned. But one cannot read this story without recognizing His overriding power in history to save His people. He has overcome Haman, the archenemy. The rest is only a matter of time. D-Day has come.

Today, we, the church of Christ, are those covenant people. All the promises of that covenant hold for us today. Today, these present days, is an important D-Day for Nigeria. During these days, the direction for the future will be determined. Peace or war? Civilian or military regime? At the time I was preparing this sermon it was impossible to predict. Perhaps, by the time I deliver this sermon, the die will have been cast.

We have prayed this week for peace and unity. And God wants to hear the prayers of His people. He wants peace above all else. However, if we who pray are also those who have contributed to present developments, then our prayers will not go beyond this cement ceiling. Then we ourselves have blocked the way to the throne of grace. Then we ourselves have blocked the way to peace. Then the destruction of Nigeria is of our own making.

If that is the case, there is only one way out – the same old recipe that the Old Testament prophets repeated time and again, the same old recipe of John the Baptist and of Jesus, who said it to the soldiers, who said it to the religious leaders, who said it to the rich and poor alike: “Repent. Repent. Repent, people of God.” God *will* hear people who have repented no matter what they have done. But it must be *real* repentance. Not merely of word or mouth, but of deed.

Those of us here in St. Piran’s who have through the years contributed to the problems whose D-Day climax we are facing right now cannot possibly expect to have things suddenly turn to the good, unless you change your ways, unless you undo the damage and corruption you have participated in, unless you do restitution and repay the nation or state or local government for all the evil you have done.

The King’s fury subsided. May God’s fury with Nigeria subside as well. But that is only on one condition: Repentance. Repent. People of God, repent. Pray for the power of God’s Spirit to stand up and change your ways. *You* know what you have to change. With His power you can and will. Believe His promises. Depend on His power.

May God bless Nigeria. Long live Nigeria (The People said, “Amen!!!”)

No, do not say “Amen” so easily – unless you are prepared to change your ways and repent.

Together all of us who have repented: *Long ... Live ... Nigeria! – Amen!!!!*

I assure you, *Nigeria will* - provided *we* repent. It's up to us as much as it is up to God.