

Message from Bishop Rachel

18 March 2025



Last Friday I was in the House of Lords participating in a Private Members' bill requiring the Government to recognise Palestine as a sovereign and independent state.

As I was about to enter the Chamber I met one of the Jewish peers with whom I have had considerable discussion in recent months regarding our different perspectives on the war in Gaza. We remain in good relationship with one another.

On this occasion he reminded me that it was the Jewish festival of Purim, celebrating the wonderful saving of the Jews from annihilation (approximately 500 BC) due to the significant intervention by the Jewish Queen Esther. I'm sure that many of us are familiar with those often-quoted words of Mordecai to Esther, his cousin, who he had adopted as his daughter: 'For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.' (Esther 4:14).

As a child I used to love reading the 10 chapters of the book from beginning to end much as I would any other adventure story full of intrigue and rescue. I read it as a story and didn't really reflect on the horror of human deception, vengeance and the brutal hanging of the power-hungry Haman.

Over the years I have been inspired by Esther's inner journey from anxiety to courage, and by Mordecai's robust exchange with Esther which goes beyond 'niceness' and rather demonstrates loving and courageous challenge even in a place of anxiety,

We live in an anxious world, and that was certainly reflected in the House of Lords debate amid vehement disagreement but mainly from a place of a commitment to staying in relationship with one another. The international landscape, the political landscape in the UK, and that of the Church of England is undoubtedly giving rise to much anxiety, among different people and in different ways, and creation is most certainly groaning (Romans 8:22).

Each year in Lent I find myself commenting on those words from the preface to the Eucharistic prayer about us as Christians learning to be God's people

once again through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline. And particularly this year I have been reflecting on the place of courage within this:

‘For in these forty days you lead us into the desert of repentance that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may grow in grace and learn to be your people once again.

Through fasting, prayer and acts of service you bring us back to your generous heart.

Through study of your holy word you open our eyes to your presence in the world

and free our hands to welcome others into the radiant splendour of your love.’

Esther fasted and prayed before daring to stand in the inner court opposite the King’s Hall, hoping to be granted a conversation with the king rather than the death penalty. I have been wondering what might be the equivalent for me and for you of praying and fasting to stand in whatever is the equivalent for us of the inner court – a place where there is inner anxiety yet from which we long to speak out, act differently, and bring challenge, filled with a God-given courage in a place where there is inequality of power.

People often refer to ‘speaking truth to power’, and sometimes that power may not reside in the typical places of someone’s role or title. Many people of different ages and backgrounds wield power of different sorts in our lives and communities, sometimes conveyed through social media. Their power can be a source of anxiety for individuals, communities and peoples. There is a diminishing of love and a conscious or unconscious desire to quench Jesus’ offering of life in all its fullness.

As I journey through Lent I am praying that I might be ever more aware of my own power and how I use it; and I am praying for all of us – children, young people and adults – that we might intentionally identify places where anxiety stems from the power exhibited by other people, and identify the places where we need to stand with courage. As we pray, we lift our eyes and hearts to God, that through the power of the Holy Spirit we might speak and act for Jesus Christ, desiring fresh encounters of hope and peace, and new signs of life in all its fullness.