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#### Chapter 7

## Esther: The Woman Who Reverses Destiny

Like Judith, Esther is striking in her beauty and virtue. She, too, saves her people from destruction. Judith, however, is more of a warrior and strategist; Esther is tender and, according to convention, more feminine. She accomplishes her goal not by wielding a sword, but with the persuasive power of her intercession.

The story of Esther takes us to the sumptuous palaces of the Persian king and gives us an insight into the life of the foreigner, the exile, and the poor. The suffering world of the Jewish Diaspora is written into the story of Esther, the orphan.

We invoke the Spirit of God so that our hearts will be open to listen to his word. May we be given eyes to see the needs of our brothers and sisters, hearts to share in their needs, and great humility, faith, and courage to place ourselves at the service of their liberation.

#### C Listening

The Book of Esther was handed down in both Hebrew and Greek. The Greek version (Septuagint) adds passages to the Hebrew text, similarly recognized by the Catholic Church as inspired. Here we will follow the account according to the order of the Hebrew text, which begins with the solemn banquet organized by King Ahasuerus for all his princes and ministers.

The king glories in showing off to his army of Persia and Media, as well as to the nobles and governors of the provinces, "the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days..." (Esth 1:4). According to the text the precise number of days is 180!

Yet the king is not content. He immediately organizes another seven-day banquet open to everyone. All the people of Susa from the greatest to the least have access to the royal garden. This is more than simply another banquet; it is intended to be the prolongation and crowning point of the first succession of banquets so as to impress everyone with the king's extreme wealth and generosity toward all. The narrator carefully describes the opulence (see Esth 1:6–7).

#### Vashti, the feminist

In this heavenly garden within the palace of Ahasuerus, amid the festivities, something completely unheard-of occurs: Vashti, the splendid queen, refuses to make an appearance at the king's banquet. He had kept her as his last great surprise, the marvel of the seventh day. She was to be led in by seven eunuchs, wearing the royal crown on her head, "in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty" (Esth 1:11). But the queen says no. Not only is it strange, but it is, above all, impudent and reckless to oppose the king's wishes. Vashti is a feminist ahead of her time.

The beautiful Vashti will not yield. She will lose her crown, but not her pride. Perhaps she is tired of all the vanity, of being paraded before the ecstatic eyes of admirers. Or maybe she simply prefers the feminine conversation at the banquet she organizes for women in the king's palace.

The wise men of the court to declare Vashti's actions an outrage that should not go unpunished. The proud queen must be dismissed immediately to keep the danger of a feminist revolution from spreading. Memucan, the wisest of the king's seven counselors, concludes:

"For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands...." (Esth 1:17)

Dismissing the queen will reestablish order; otherwise, the primacy of man over woman, of a husband over his wife, of the king over the queen, could be threatened.

#### Esther, the submissive beauty

With the dismissal of Queen Vashti, the search begins for beautiful young women for the king. The woman who most pleases him will be crowned queen. So, from among many women, Esther, too, "was taken" (Esth 2:8). Without revealing her Jewish identity, Esther prepares herself for her decisive encounter with the king. The preparations take twelve months: "six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics..." (Esth 2:12). Each woman then passes a night with the king and in the morning is transferred into the harem—at which point she becomes his property. But a woman does not return to the king unless he calls for her by name (see Esth 2:14). These are the laws in effect at the court of Ahasuerus.

When Esther's turn arrives, she immediately conquers the king. He loves her more than all the other women and makes her queen in Vashti's place. He offers a great banquet and grants a day of rest throughout the whole empire. Order has now been reestablished. Esther is as splendid as Vashti, but unlike her, she is humble and submissive.

Up to this point Esther's role is passive. At first glance, she is simply a feminine object of enjoyment: "she was taken to please." She seems to fulfill her duty by giving pleasure to the king. But the Bible has a surprise for us: Esther pleases another king—her God, who will transform this timid girl, bereft at an early age, into a great protagonist. The moment will come when Esther takes the initiative and succeeds in influencing both kings—the God of Israel and the fearsome Ahasuerus—to favor her people.

#### The threat of extermination

At Ahasuerus' court is a powerful man, Haman, who hates the Hebrews. Above all he hates Mordecai, Esther's uncle, a Jew who refuses to prostrate himself whenever Haman passes, as had been ordered. The man will not conform. Such irreverent diversity is intolerable. He must be eliminated, along with his entire people. Terribly wounded in his conceit, Haman approaches the king with these words:

"There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction...." (Esth 3:8–9)

The king consents, and on the thirteenth day of the month of Nisan, the lot, called the "Pur," is cast to decide the day and the month in which, throughout the empire, the extermination of the Jews will take place. Lots fall to the thirteenth day of Adar, the last month of the year. A letter is then sent to the 127 provinces of the empire with the irreversible edict to annihilate on that day "all Jews, young and old, women and children..." (Esth 3:13).

#### Esther, the woman who liberates her people

Immediately, there is alarm and great lament in the citadel of Susa. Mordecai covers himself in sackcloth and ashes and traverses the city, raising a bitter cry. When news of Mordecai's actions reaches the palace, Esther sends clothes to him, but he refuses them. Instead, he informs her of the threat that hangs over their people and sends word to her through the guard that she should present herself to the king to ask for his favor.

This is not as simple a request as it might appear to us today. According to the law, whoever appeared before the king without being summoned would be put to death. Esther confides to Mordecai that she has not been summoned before the king in thirty days (see Esth 4:11). Yet, if the whole people pray and fast, she will risk it. Here begins Esther's adventure. She who had lived virtually all her life passively and submissively now must take the initiative, risking her own life to intercede for her people's liberation. Mordecai reminds her that it was for this that she had been made queen; that certainly happened by divine purpose.

Thus, while the Hebrew community in the citadel of Susa lives under the constant threat of extermination, Esther humbles herself before the Lord and addresses her trusting prayer to him. It is a very beautiful prayer, grounded totally on confidence in the Lord, reinforced by her experience as an orphan: "...help me, who am alone and have no helper but you" (Esth 14:3).

Then, like Judith, Esther moves from prayer to action. She beautifies herself and appears before the king. In her own way, Esther resembles Vashti in her daring, but her actions are the complete opposite. Without the king having called for her, she dares to appear before him, an action meriting death.

The sacred author tells the story in a captivating way. The lion (the king) is conquered by disarming beauty; the strong

one who strikes terror in hearts is subjected by feminine tenderness (see Esth 5:3–5). Overcome by fear, Esther faints. In a poignant scene, the king bounds from his throne, takes into his arms his young beloved, who appears even more beautiful in her swooning pallor, and comforts her with surprising words: "'What is it, Esther? I am your husband. Take courage; You shall not die....' Then he raised the golden scepter and touched her neck with it, he embraced her, and said, 'Speak to me'" (Esth 15:9, 10, 11).

Then follows an event that shows how during a feast the destiny of death is overturned (see Esth 5:5–8), first of all for Esther, on whom the king's scepter gently rests, and then for all her people. The terrible Haman is compelled to do for Mordecai what he had dreamed of for himself: to clothe him in royal robes, with a crown on his head, and conduct him through the city on the king's horse, accompanied by this proclamation: "Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor" (Esth 6:9). In the end, Haman will hang from the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

The lots (*purim*) are overturned, thanks to the intervention of a woman who trusted completely in the Lord and who willingly risked her own life.

#### Esther and Moses

Another point to consider is the symbolic link between the feast of Passover and the feast of Purim, between the figures of Moses and Esther. During the month of Nisan, the Jews celebrate Passover, the great memorial of their liberation from Egypt. Precisely during this month of Nisan, the annihilation of the people at Susa was decreed. The sacred author points out that the king's secretaries issue the edict of extermination on the thirteenth of Nisan, the day on which —at sundown—the paschal lamb is immolated. Paradoxically, the end of Israel is set on the day on which it celebrates the memorial of its liberation.

In that paschal context, the figure of Esther resembles that of Moses: it is she whom God has chosen to overturn the lots (*purim*), to turn the situation upside down. Now the lots are cast for the thirteenth of Adar, the last month of the Jewish calendar. All the Jews are to be exterminated on that day, from the greatest to the least. Instead, on that day the enemies of the Jews are slain, as happened to Pharaoh and his troops as they try to pass through the Red Sea. In that sense, Jews celebrate the feast of Purim, that is, the upheaval of plans that God accomplished through Esther's intervention.

#### CO Toward Deeper Listening

Like Judith, Esther does not have children. This may indicate that the sacred author viewed her, like Judith, in the perspective of a wider maternity. Esther bore the people into a new life, liberating them from destruction.

Esther's Hebrew name, Hadassah, means "myrtle." Esther, instead, is a Persian name, which means "star" (*stareh*) and calls to mind the great goddess Ishtar. But the crown of myrtle, that is to say, victory, comes not from Ishtar or from Marduch (the Persian god to whom the name of Mordecai alludes), but from the God of Israel.

#### ○ BIBLICAL TEXTS

- Esther, like Daniel, encounters the benevolence of the guards, a sign of the divine protection: Esth 2:9–10; Dan 1:3–9.
- Esther is seized with mortal anguish and seeks refuge in the Lord: Esth 14:3ff.; so does the Psalmist: Ps 35; so does Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: Mk 14:34–36.
- Through Esther, God turns the tables and "vindicated his inheritance": Esth 10:12; confront the upending sung by Hannah: 1 Sam 2:4–8; and by Mary in the Magnificat: Lk 1:46–55.

#### Dialogue and Comparison

We now go from listening to meditation with the help of some questions. We allow ourselves to be personally summoned by the word, and we compare our life to Jesus Christ, the Word of the living God.

1. Though she lives in luxury, Esther does not forget the social conditions and faith of her people. She lives out her favored condition within the framework of faith and solidarity. It is God who directs history. If she became queen, it was not for herself, but for the life of her people.

Am I aware of my vocation?

Do I use the gifts I've received egoistically, or do I put them at the service of others, for the liberation of my brothers and sisters?

How would I describe the bond that unites me with other people? Is it one of solidarity, or of apathy and lack of interest?

2. Esther experiences success and admiration. She guards her femininity, beauty, and charm, but she guards more carefully her interior beauty and her relationship with God.

How do I act during positive moments of success, attention from others, and recognition? Do I manage to live these moments with joy and balance, praising the Lord because the gifts I possess are his?

During these moments, do I also cultivate that attractiveness that is worth more in God's eyes—my relationship with him and, consequently, my relationship with others?

3. Esther also experiences the difficulty of taking the initiative against the king's orders. Perhaps her loss of both parents had made her timid and insecure. Nevertheless, Esther does not cling to psychological reasons to defend her fear. Instead, she takes refuge in the Lord and in him finds strength to overcome herself and to be reborn as a daring woman who risks her life for her people. That does

not prevent her from feeling all of her fragility. In fact, looking Ahasuerus in the face is enough for her to lose heart. Yet she will rally and fulfill her mission.

Do I run into difficulties similar to Esther's? How do I go through them? Do I allow my past life to paralyze me? Do I get stuck in a rut? Or do I find in prayer the strength to overcome myself in order to do what is asked of me for the good of the community and the people with whom I live?

Do I ever break the rules of social convention for the good of others—in particular to render justice to the least in society?

#### O Prayer

We contemplate God's work in Esther and we make her prayer our own.

Esther glorifies God, above all, as her people's only Lord and King; she recognizes his justice and the sin of her people; finally she intercedes for the Lord's mercy: he cannot consent to the destruction of his people without dishonoring himself.

"O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, for my danger is in my hand. Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord!

"O Lord, do not surrender your scepter to what has no being; and do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us. Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord." (Esth 14:3-7, 11-14)

We present to the Lord the needs of our communities and of the universal Church. We also present him with our fears, what instinctively pulls us away from adverse or difficult circumstances, and we ask him for the courage to take initiative in word and action, risking ourselves if the good of our brothers and sisters calls for it.

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We entrust to the intercession of Mary, the Esther of the New Covenant, the resolution we make while we listen to the word and compare ourselves with it.