

Reflection for the 1st Thursday of Lent

FIRST READING: Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25

A reading from the Book of Esther:

Queen Esther, seized with mortal anguish, had recourse to the LORD. She lay prostrate upon the ground, together with her handmaids, from morning until evening, and said: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, blessed are you. Help me, who am alone and have no help but you, for I am taking my life in my hand. As a child I used to hear from the books of my forefathers that you, O LORD, always free those who are pleasing to you. Now help me, who am alone and have no one but you, O LORD, my God. "And now, come to help me, an orphan. Put in my mouth persuasive words in the presence of the lion and turn his heart to hatred for our enemy, so that he and those who are in league with him may perish. Save us from the hand of our enemies; turn our mourning into gladness and our sorrows into wholeness.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 138:1-2ab, 2cde-3, 7c-8

Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with all my heart, for you have heard the words of my mouth; in the presence of the angels I will sing your praise; I will worship at your holy temple and give thanks to your name.

Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

Because of your kindness and your truth; for you have made great above all things your name and your promise. When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me.

Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

Your right hand saves me. The LORD will complete what he has done for me; your kindness, O LORD, endures forever; forsake not the work of your hands.

Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

GOSPEL: Matthew 7:7-12

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asked for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asked for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 1st Thursday of Lent

As far as I can tell, today's reading from the book of Esther is the sole entry of it in our current lectionary for mass. In Judaism, it is most often read during the Feast of Purim or, in English, the Feast of Lots and refers to casting lots (or dice) which were used by the king of Persia to determine whether the Jews of his realm would live or be exterminated. The ancients believed that random events like throwing dice were determined by divine intervention. The Jews won the toss.

The book of Esther has two parts one written in Hebrew and the other written in Greek. The Greek part is a reflection upon and a nuanced version of the Hebrew text. When read during Purim it is sometimes acted out as a triumph of Jewish culture, faith and people against bigotry, pogroms and persecution. The Hebrew story never mentions God whereas the Greek story does. The Hebrew text has numbered chapters like the rest of the bible but the Greek part is lettered A to F. Today's reading from chapter C is from the Greek version of the story.

Esther is married to the king of Persia and prays to God to save her and all the Jews of the king's realm. This is no trivial matter; lives depend upon God's action or inaction. Esther, too, is taking her life in her hands as she dedicates herself to the survival of her and God's people. Anti-Semitism is not just something that began in modern times, but the Jewish people have faced persecution and risked death for having been chosen by God for millennia. Being born Jewish is an accident of birth and in God's hands. This is why bigotry is an offense against God as well as people and a grave sin.

Esther's actions, reflected in her prayer, are the clear link to the gospel story. She is asking, knocking and seeking by the act of praying. As we read this story, hasn't she gained our ear, compassion and identification with her? This is Jesus' point in his preaching. Who was Esther attempting to influence? God, the king, her Gentile neighbors or us? God is already on her side, knowing her better than she knew herself. The narrative let us know that Esther was married to the king and queen of Persia. She was his beloved too. She had already won his heart. Of her neighbors we can never know; the narrative does not relate more. But of us; has she won our hearts as true believers in God? By God's grace she has.

This gospel from Matthew always reminds me of the story of the man who desires to win the lottery. "Lord, let me win the lottery!" the man prayed each day and several times. Despite the fervor and faith with which he prayed, God was silent and inactive. He never won. One day, in desperation the man confronted God and God replied in a gentle, loving voice, "You have to go and buy a ticket." I'm never one to trivialize prayer in praying for personal gain in the face of others' loss. Praying to win the lottery means everyone else must lose. Prayer is never to enlighten God to our priorities. It allows us to see them in the open. Jesus, as in Tuesday's gospel, taught us to pray to do God's will; not to get God to do ours.

Ask, seek and knock; it sounds so simple and clear. You will receive, then find and doors will open. However prayer is not a magical incantation. It's an opening of ourselves to God. We will first receive faith. We will discover God's presence and God will give us new life. These are the fruits of God's gifts. Even the desire to pray, in the first place, is God's gift to us. We give

nothing to God but ourselves and that is all God seeks from us. We come from God. We live with God, who never leaves us. We return to God when we die; bringing nothing but the first gift God gave us, our very life.

This is powerful as it is; However Matthew rooted this story with the words of Jesus in human interactions and relationships. We know what is good to give people in need; our compassion, help and support. Even though we are sinners, we still know what is good and can give it. This gospel is not just about our relationship with God and God with us. It's also about our interactions and relationships with the people we meet and who are around us. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you!" This is not just good advice to live in peace with each other. This is at the basis of faith; covenant and God's Word. We can forget that God enters our lives through one another. God works through us.

Esther took action to save the lives of her brothers and sisters in faith as well as herself. Her prayer showed her commitment to God and community. In taking her life in her hands, at the same time, placed her life and the lives of her kin-folk in God's hands. To ask, seek and to knock are not just actions to take in the presence of God. There are people all around us who can answer, reveal and open up to a new possibility. We live in a world that is filled with the presence of God. We have the eyes of faith to see it.

May we respond with the compassion of God to those who need us.

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PS: Wikipedia has good articles on Queen Esther and Purim. The actual book of Esther is not very long and a charming read. These are some pretty good alternatives to binge watching TV and surfing the net; especially during Lent.