



Galaxies Evening Service 3 June 2007

Service by Fergus Collinson
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Welcome:

Welcome to our service tonight

Tonight we celebrating our official second Birthday each year, Yes, Queens Birthday is celebrated in recognition that we are all Queens one way or another and what better way to acknowledge this than with with cake and conviviality!



Imperial Queen Allyson Ann Allante is fabulously "The Stonewall Statue of Liberty"! She is grandly, colorfully and proudly posing as the new, live and Gay community version of the Statue of Liberty. Queen Allyson was instantly surrounded by paparazzi from every major and minor newspaper, magazine and television station and, from the overflowing parade sidelines, spectators cheering loudly and proudly and shooting endless photos.

Call to togetherness and sharing:

Leader: God, we are all part of you, your creation, your life and your love.

We give thanks for being who we are, made in your image and likeness and especially for the extra dose of fabulousness!!

All: **May the love of God lead is in surprising twists and turns, self discovery and help us to care for all of creation**

There are Queens and then there are Queens like Esther!

The somewhat condensed story of Esther

The Book of Esther appears near the close of the Hebrew Bible and is part of the third major section of biblical texts, the Writings, which include Psalms and Proverbs. Jews refer to the book as the scroll of Esther, and celebrate its story as part of the springtime festival of Purim. Esther tells the story of the salvation of Persia's Jewish community and may be the greatest endorsement of the idea of Jews living in diaspora to appear in the Bible.

The story opens at a lavish party thrown by King Ahasuerus (also known as King Xerxes) of Persia. Ahasuerus asks his wife, Vashti, to dress up so he can show her off, but she refuses and Ahasuerus banishes her from his presence and strips her of her title. Among the "beautiful young virgins" brought to the palace as possible replacements is Esther, or Hadassah in Hebrew, the cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai the Jew. At Mordecai's advice, Esther does not reveal her Jewishness to the king. After a year long tryout, with all the prospective queens living in one house in the manner of a modern reality Television show, Esther is chosen.

Mordecai, who seems to be a member of the king's court, soon uncovers a plot to kill the king, and Esther informs her husband. Mordecai's service is recorded, but the king is not told who saved his life. For unspecified reasons, Mordecai then refuses to bow down to the new prime minister, Haman, who retaliates by saying he will have all the Jews in Persia killed. Haman tells Ahasuerus that a certain people in the kingdom, who refuse to obey the king's laws, threaten his reign and should be destroyed. Ahasuerus agrees (though he doesn't know the order refers to the Jews) and sends out postal couriers to spread word of the genocide to be held eleven months later, on the thirteenth of Adar.

Mordecai pleads with Esther to intervene. After initially refusing, she invites the king and Haman to a private party. Haman is flattered by the attention and, feeling cocky, decides to build a special stake to impale Mordecai. (some bibles say he built a gallows to hang Mordecai) That night the king cannot sleep and decides to look through the records, where he discovers that Mordecai saved his life. "How should a devoted subject be honoured?" the king asks Haman. Thinking the king must be referring to himself, Haman says, "Ride him through town on special steeds." Haman is then asked to lead Mordecai on such a journey.



The next night Esther again invites the king and Haman to a private party, where she reveals her identity to the king and begs for the life of her people. Horrified by the realisation that he ordered the killing of the Jews, Ahasuerus sentences Haman to be impaled on the stake he built for Mordecai. Mordecai is elevated to prime minister and is invited to issue a new edict in the king's name, delivered again by postal couriers. Unable to overturn the irrevocable command, Mordecai orders the Jews to defend themselves from attack and *massacre any people* who assault them, including women and children.



When the thirteenth of Adar arrives, the Jews fight back, slaying more than 500 people in Susa. The king asks Esther what else she would like. If it please Your Majesty, Esther replies, please allow the Jews to kill for a second day. By the time the fighting ends, the Jews have slain more than 75,000 people. Mordecai orders Jews to celebrate a festival of Purim, from the word *pur*, the lot that Haman cast to determine the date for the genocide. The festival, on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar, is regarded as a period of deliverance, a second Exodus, and is observed around the world with feasting, joy, and elaborate costumes children wear while acting out the story.

We pulled out our bibles. Long before we came to Iran, Linda knew that one central idea of my travels was reading the stories of the Bible in the places where they occurred. In Hamadan, that meant Esther.

The first thing she told me, was that she had grown up idolizing Esther. "Long before I wanted to be a Moroccan princess at my wedding," she said, "I wanted to be a Persian princess and I dressed up as Queen Esther on Halloween. Not Purim, Halloween. I wore a green dress with a crown and dangly earrings. I think my mother still has a picture of it.

"How come you never mentioned this before?"

"I had forgotten about it until now. But the truth is, now that I've read the story, I'm realizing that we must have gotten the sanitized version in Sunday school."

For both of us, reading the Book of Esther in Iran was unnerving. From its opening, in which the king throws a party that lasts half a year, to its closing, in which the Jews throw a festival to celebrate their slaughter of 75,000 people, the story reeks of moral depravity.

The narrative revolves around parties—ten in all. The king, who is portrayed as an impulsive drunk, deposes his first queen at a banquet, enthrones Esther at another, celebrates with Haman at one gala, then sends him to his death at another. The Jews celebrate their edict to fight back at one party, then their bloody victory at two more. Considering the Bible is interested in morality, this open ribaldry is surprising.

In part for this reason, the Book of Esther has come under withering attack since antiquity. Critics have lambasted its debauchery, the cruelty of its characters, and the fact that none of the central figures shows any kindness or forgiveness. More important, nowhere in the story is there a mention of God. Ancient Jewish sages argued against its inclusion in the Hebrew Bible. Martin Luther said he wished it did not exist at all, arguing that it lionized Jews too much. Some contemporary polemicists used it as the basis for antisemitism, pointing out that once the Jews assume power they massacre their neighbours.

I asked Linda how she felt the Jews came across.

"Horribly. When the Jews are oppressed, they're generous, but once they get power, they're vengeful. It reminds me — " She started to talk about contemporary Israeli politics but caught herself. "But you know what it really reminds me of?" she continued, "David and Solomon. I guess the Bible doesn't like kings very much. Once Esther and Mordecai join the royal court, they also behave poorly. I think Jews are best as the moral minority. And when we get power, we are not immune to the fact that power corrupts"

I asked Linda if she felt the Jews in the story were oppressed.

"No," she said. "I'm amazed at how much they seem integrated into the community." She pointed to Esther 3:15, after the king issues his initial order to kill the Jews: "The couriers went out posthaste on the royal mission, and the decree was proclaimed in the fortress Susa. The king and Haman sat down to feast but that Susa was dumbfounded."

"I read that to mean that the Susans liked their Jewish neighbours," Linda said, "and were confused about why the king would suddenly order the Jews to be annihilated."

That sense of acceptance is reinforced when the order for the Jews to defend themselves is again sent by mounted courier, this time on the king's own steeds. "First of all," Linda said, "I'm thinking absolutely of Darius's postal system and the fact that they have two types of horses, the regular and the fast. The first orders to kill the Jews, goes out on regular horses, but the second goes out on the FedEx horses because the king is more anxious to counteract that order. And again, the order goes out in the script of each province, even the Jewish script. They don't have to assimilate. They're allowed to keep their own language.

"So you think the story is an ode to diaspora?"

"In some ways. It's striking that nowhere do the Jews ask to be returned to Jerusalem, or to rebuild the Temple. They're happy to be living side by side with their Persian neighbours, drinking in their own way, worshiping in their own language. It's exactly like the Persepolis, with all these different people talking with one another, being happy. It's not that diaspora is necessarily good, it's that diaspora works if there are certain conditions under which the Jews are able to live in peaceful coexistence.'

Notices