

The Reading is taken from the book of Esther, from chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes of Persia, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king.

In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai the Jew had adopted) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested.

And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, in the seventh year of his reign.

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen.

Now when Haman, the King's official, saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, 'There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them.'

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and told him 'Do with these people as you please.'

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.

When Esther's attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai gave him a copy of the edict for their annihilation, and he told him to instruct Esther to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai:

'All the king's officials know that for any man or woman who approaches the king without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death, unless the king extends the gold sceptre to them and spares their lives.'

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: 'Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?'

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'

So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.