

HOMILY, DEANERY LENTEN STATION, 5 MARCH 2020

Next Monday and Tuesday, go onto the streets in Lower Prestwich and Higher Broughton, and you will see some remarkable scenes. People will be in fancy dress. There will be clowns, and dancing in the streets. It will be the feast of Purim. Our Jewish neighbours will be enjoying a very happy holiday.

And why? It's all explained in the Book of Esther, and our first reading tonight was a short extract from the Book of Esther. Esther's story is quickly told. She lived at a time when the whole Eastern world was ruled by Persia (present day Iran). Then, as now, the Jews had their enemies. These enemies hatched a plot against the Jews. Everything was in place for the massacre of all Jews in the Persian empire. It was a huge empire. It stretched from India to Ethiopia. It included the land we know today as the Holy Land. The date of the massacre had been published. The Jewish people were to be wiped out. No wonder they were in mourning. It seemed that nothing could save them.

Two things did save them. Some time before, there was a plot to kill the king of Persia. A Jew called Mordecai had saved the king's life. As a reward, Mordecai had been given a special title. And now, Mordecai's niece, Esther, had pleased the king by her beauty and she had become the king's wife and his queen. But there was a problem. The good Mordecai had done for the king was on record, but he had no way of reminding the king about it. No way, unless his niece Esther would act for him. And her hands were tied by the court rules. She could not go in to see the king unless the king called her. And he hadn't called her for over a month. And the penalty for going in without being called was death.

Esther prayed. We heard part of her prayer in that first reading. She prayed for her people: 'Lord, save us by your hand. And come to my help, for I am alone and have no one but you, Lord.' So she took her life in her hands.

Unannounced, she went into the king's presence and pleaded for her people. And the king heard her plea. He stopped the massacre of the Jews. And he told them 'among your solemn festivals, celebrate this as a special day, with every kind of feasting'. So began the feast of Purim. And next Monday and Tuesday, Jewish people in Prestwich and Higher Broughton and all over the world will celebrate their rescue from destruction.

Now, what has all this to do with us Catholics, here in England, in the year 2020? First of all, we too can rejoice at the feast of Purim. Because, by saving her people from destruction, Esther made possible the birth of Christ. If all the Jews had been wiped out, Jesus would never have been born.

And second, because the early writers in the Church – we call them the ‘Church Fathers’ – saw a close resemblance between Queen Esther and Our Blessed Lady. Think about it. In times of trouble, we too, like Esther, want to ask God’s help. Esther could plead for her people because her uncle Mordecai had saved the king’s life. So we can plead with the Father because of his Son’s saving death and resurrection.

But who will plead for us? We know our own shortcomings, our own unworthiness. We need to find some advocate who can claim God’s attention better than we can. Who has a better right to stand in God’s royal presence than Our Lady? She alone was conceived without original sin. She has always been present in the mind of God. She, the Queen of Heaven, is always in God’s royal presence. Mordecai said to Queen Esther: ‘Speak to the king for us, and save us from death’. (4:8) Esther did speak, and the king said to her: ‘Tell me what you desire. I grant it to you’. (5:3) Esther’s intercession worked. But Our Lady’s power of intercession is even stronger than Queen Esther’s.

English people long ago had a special devotion to Our Lady. It’s reckoned that half the parish churches in England were dedicated to her. One example is St Mary’s pre-Reformation church here in Prestwich. There’s also a famous painting in the National Gallery in London. It’s called ‘the Wilton Diptych’. It shows King Richard II placing England under the protection of Our Blessed Lady as ‘her dowry’. Another king, the infamous Henry VIII, reversed what Richard had done. Henry had the statue of Our Lady brought from Walsingham and burnt in London.

But now, this very month, we will be privileged to take part in the re-dedication of our country to Our Lady. It will be on the last Sunday of this month, the Sunday after the feast of the Annunciation. The re-dedication will take place in every Catholic cathedral and in many parishes and homes.

So what is this re-dedication for us? Well, it’s both personal. And it’s communal. It’s personal, in that each one of us celebrates the fact that Jesus gave us *His* mother as *our* mother. And we take to ourselves what she said to the waiters at the wedding feast of Cana: ‘Do whatever He tells you.’ And the

re-dedication is also communal. We come together as the people of this country to renew the dedication made so long ago. We will be asking for Our Lady's prayers and her protection, for ourselves and for this country. We will ask her to help the whole Church in this country in one very special way. And that is, to help us bring the Good News of her Son Jesus to the people of today by our own witness to the Faith.

And we may not be popular. Like the people of the Jews, the Church of God too has its enemies. St Paul wrote about the 'spiritual army of evil'. We have to struggle, he said, against 'the Sovereignities and the Powers who originate the darkness in this world'. (Ephesians 6:12) Our country of England is not immune against the 'spiritual army of evil'. You all know how England's Christian heritage has been watered down and even reversed in recent years. We're in much the same kind of situation that the first apostles were in. We too need to follow St Paul's advice to the first followers of Christ in Rome. Paul wrote: 'Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind.' (Romans 12:2) We must have the courage to stand up for what we know is right.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols has called the re-dedication 'A moment of great promise ... for the Church in this country and for our mission'. The re-dedication of England as the 'Dowry of Mary' is so opportune. Our Lady is a living example of the truth, and the goodness, and the beauty, and the joy of our Faith. Her prayers and her protection can bring England back to the fulness of its ancient faith. Then we too will have our own kind of Purim. Then we too might well be dancing in the streets!