

So, a couple of weeks ago now when Julia was speaking we saw one of the many reversals of fortune that happen throughout the story of Esther – Haman had become so angry about Mordecai that he couldn't wait the 12 months until the whole of the Jewish race would be exterminated – Mordecai had become such a problem to him that he took his wife's advice and decided to have him killed immediately – hung on a gallows 75 feet high – which seems a bit like overkill to me. And he would ask the king for permission the very next day.

But, that same night through an extraordinary set of circumstances, which the reader is meant to assume was the hand of God at work even though it wasn't made explicit, the king was prompted to honour Mordecai for his role in saving the king's life. And in an ironic twist, in the morning, as Haman was waiting for the right time to bring his request to the king to have Mordecai killed, the King instructed Haman to publicly honour Mordecai for all he had done for the king.

As Haman went home, humiliated, his pride in tatters, his wife and advisors recognised the significance of this reversal – because Mordecai is a Jew, you cannot stand against him – why? Because he has super powers – no – because he worships Yahweh, and from the events of that day it was clear that Yahweh was batting on his side – which meant that there was only one outcome – Haman, you will surely come to ruin.

So it must have been with a heavy heart that Haman went with the king to dine with Queen Esther the next day. But at this stage, despite the gloomy prediction of his wife, he had no idea that the Queen was also a Jew. He had no idea what her petition to the king would be, and he may well have hoped that being in the privileged position of dining with the king and the queen would have lifted his spirits after the public humiliation of yesterday.

As they were drinking wine with the anticipation having been building over the past 24 hours, the King asked Esther what her petition was — he wants to know and has let it be known that he will be favourable to her request, and is ready to give her whatever she wants – up to half his kingdom.

But despite the king's indication of favour, his response to her request was by no means certain. Esther would have been aware that the threat against her and her people had two perpetrators, Haman and the king, and both were present with her. But in order for her petition to be successful, she needed to find a way of exposing the culpability of Haman, while at the same time never appearing to bring charges against the king.

What she said next would be crucial, this was a pivotal moment. And so Esther's reply was very carefully thought out and spoken with extreme tact.

First of all, she emphasises her special relationship with the king – If I have found favour with you O king – Up until this point she had addressed the king in the third person – if the king wants to come to a banquet that I have prepared – which was normal court protocol for talking to the king, in the same way as everyone calls the president of the USA Mr President. But here Esther address the king as you – more personal – slightly risky, but possible because of the favour that the king has shown her.

Secondly, as she makes her request for her life and those of her people to be saved, the language she used to expose the threat is also carefully chosen – she used the specific terms that Haman had used in his edict against the Jews – destruction, slaughter, annihilation. In doing so she alluded to the source of the threat against her – but she avoided any reference to the king’s part in the proceedings.

Thirdly, aware that she was putting the king in a difficult position, again with great tact she apologised to the king for raising a matter that might embarrass or distress him.

And it is important for us to be aware that in making her request to the king, she knew that she would have no choice but to reveal her own identity as a Jew – and so expose herself to the threat of death. At this point in the story, it may have been possible for her to deny her identity, to keep her head down, and save her own life. Who would know that she was a Jew – who would dare reveal her identity to the king if they did know?

But rather than opt for self preservation, she risked her own life in an attempt to save the lives of her people. This of course is in stark contrast to the King’s inaction and disinterest to Haman’s request for mass genocide

And I wonder if we were faced with a similar situation to Esther, how would we respond? Would we put our life on the line for the sake of others? Most of us I guess would like to think that we would – hoping that we never have to find out of course.

But on a smaller scale, what about the choices we make on a daily basis. Are we willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of others – on a very very small scale – are we willing to buy fair-trade products so that other people can have a fairer wage? I personally like the taste of fair trade coffee and tea – but even if we don’t – can we really justify not buying it when it makes such a difference to the people that pick the leafs and beans in other places in the world.

Esther was willing to die to do the right thing for her people – sometimes we are reluctant to even drink an iffy cup of tea.

So, Esther made her request and everything now depended on the king’s reaction – and fortunately for her he was incensed at this threat to the life of his queen. It is also clear that he hadn’t made the connection between this threat to her life and Haman’s plot against the Jews or indeed his own part in it. So with marvellous irony, he asked Esther for both the identity and whereabouts of the perpetrator, utterly unaware that he was sitting at the table with them.

Esther, again showing remarkable political skill, in response to the king's anger now revealed her own anger about this threat, which would no doubt have raised the tension and hostility in the room – and she spits out the identity of the adversary and enemy – it is none other than the vile Haman –

How would the king respond to this startling revelation, what would he do? Well it seems that he wasn't sure and so in an attempt to buy himself some time he stormed out of the room and went into the garden. This seems in keeping with what we know about Xerxes, bereft of the advice of the once trusted Haman, the king was unsure what to do. Could he punish Haman for a plot that he was in agreement with or for an irrevocable edict that had gone out with his name on it?

But while the king was not immediately sure what he would do, Haman knew that he was in trouble – the narrator tells us that he was terrified before the king and queen. He knew that his fate was sealed, that the king would support his queen rather than him, and so he had one chance left to save himself. To beg the queen for mercy.

But in another of those seemingly coincidental happenings in this story, the king returns at that very moment, and catches Haman pleading for his life – but his pleas for mercy are misunderstood and the king cries out – will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?

It is highly unlikely that the king genuinely believed that under these circumstances Haman was attempting to harm the queen, but by choosing to interpret Haman's actions in this way it provided him with a way to charge Haman without raising publicly the true reason – the plot to kill the Jews.

So the king's return to the room at just that moment provided the excuse that he needed to deal with Haman without losing face himself - and given the king's track record, it seems that this was pretty important, probably more important than doing the right thing for his wife.

And so as one author has put it, this was another remarkable coincidence that acted in favour of the Jews. And again, while it isn't stated explicitly, it is clear that the author's intention was for the readers to see the providential hand of God at work to save his people.

From this point events moved rapidly to their conclusion and the execution of Mordecai. One of the king's eunuchs, sensing that the king's accusation implied a sentence of death, stepped in and took the decision out of the king's hands. Haman's face was covered, an act that seems to imply that he was under the sentence of death, and the eunuch suggested the appropriate means of execution, the gallows that Haman has had built outside his own house – and in the process of making this suggestion also provided another accusation against Haman, that he knowingly sought to take the life of the man who had saved the life of the king.

With his decision further justified, the king immediately ordered the execution of Haman.

And so, irony is added to coincidence as Haman is taken away and executed on the very gallows that he intended for Mordecai, and he is executed for a crime he didn't commit.

And while it would be wrong to use this story as a proof text for God's support of capital punishment, what it does reveal is that evil and evil people will not prosper. They may for a time, and sometimes they appear to prosper for much longer than seems right. But evil will not overcome God, and at the right time he will act against those who oppose him and his people.

As we look at all the trouble in our world, sometimes we may wonder where God is, sometimes it looks like evil is winning, but this story reminds us that God is on our side, God is battling for us, God is waging war against the forces of darkness that seek to do harm. And we have no idea what schemes of the darkness have been prevented by his hand – and ultimately, God will overcome and all evil people like Haman will receive their punishment.

Rev 17:14 They will make war against the Lamb , but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings — and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

But back in the story – we are told that with the death of Haman, the king's fury subsided. The immediate threat to his wife, the affront of Haman draping himself all over her as he begged for mercy had been dealt with – but the threat to the Jewish people remained.

In fact, for Esther, the task of saving her people had only just begun. The irrevocable law that demanded the extermination of all Jews, including the queen was still in force. And at the end of this scene in the story, we are left with the question – will the Queen be able to get the king to overturn the edict and save her and her people.

We will have to wait till next week to find out.