

Esther

A Sermon by Bishop Graham Kings

at St Andrew's Chesterton, Cambridge

Sun 26 Sept 2021, 10.00am

Esther 4: 6-17

Introduction

This morning we are pondering the whole book of Esther in the Old Testament, with the help of [Silvia Dimitrova's](#) painting, '[Esther](#)'.

Alison and I commissioned Silvia to paint a series of seven paintings of [Women in the Bible](#) over 17 years, 2003-2020. She is a Bulgarian icon writer based in Bath, and at Downside School, where her husband is a teacher, and has become a close friend. This iconic painting is of [egg tempera on wood](#) and was [unveiled](#) in January 2020.

I have written a [poem](#) expounding each of the paintings and [Tristan Latchford](#), a Cambridge composer, has written an [anthem](#) on each of the poems and paintings.

Currently, all seven of our paintings are at Chester Cathedral for Black History Month, in an exhibition entitled, '[Global Images of Christ: Challenging Perceptions](#)'.

Esther is the middle name of our youngest daughter, Katie, and her face is reflected in the painting. With her two sisters, she sang in St Andrew's Youth Choir when we worshipped here 1996-2000.

The book of Esther is set in Susa, the capital of Persia. In June 2020, Ali and I were enthralled by the BBC Four series, [Art of Persia](#). This three-part study of the history and culture of Iran was presented by [Samira Ahmed](#), the BBC journalist of Indian heritage. It is still available on iPlayer and worth watching.

Let's turn now to the painting and poem, which are printed on your service leaflet. What do you see?



Questions Raised by the Painting

Who is this woman,
Framed by arches,
Beautiful, bountiful,
Centred, subtle, shrewd,
Carrying scented lilies?

Who is this man,
Pictured with pillars,
Royal, imperial,
Majestic, magnetic,
Extending his sceptre?

Who is this man,
Holding a scroll, eyes alert,
Beckoning, suggesting,
Suppliant, petitioning?

Who is this man,
Head down, eyes closed,
Gallowed, glowering,
Schemer, scowling?

Who are these girls,
Gazing at us,
And the woman,
With posy and scroll?

Exposition of the Story

In August 2019, while we were on holiday, Silvia and her family stayed at our house in Bermondsey, London. They visited the [British Museum](#) twice and she spent five hours in the [Persian section](#) to ensure that the architecture and other details of her painting were accurate.

Centre right is [Esther](#), Queen of Persia. She is Jewish, but the King does not know that. He got rid of his previous Queen, Vashti, because she was disobedient to him and had stood up to him. Esther is carrying lilies which resonate with the [traditional portrayal](#) of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Centre left is [Xerxes](#) the Great, called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, the frightening King of the Persian Empire, which stretched from India to Ethiopia. He reigned from 484 to 465 BC.

Bottom left is [Mordecai](#), the cousin and foster-father of Esther. Previously, he had prevented the assassination of Xerxes. After overhearing some eunuchs talking about a plot to kill the King he had sent a warning to the King through Esther. Now he has to send another key message to his cousin.

[Haman](#), top right, is the focused personification of persecution of the Jews in the Bible. As chief adviser to the King, he connives to get his permission to have the Jews exterminated and a day is chosen by lot for them to be executed. In particular, he hates Mordecai, and prepares a very high gallows for him, which you can see in the painting.

Mordecai sends a message to Esther that she has to 'come out' as Jewish to her husband, which would entail great courage, to save her people. He says, 'Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?'

Esther is brave and invites the King and Haman to a feast. There she denounces Haman and his plot. Haman is [hoist with his own petard](#). He is hung on the very gallows he had designed for Mordecai.

The Jewish girls, bottom right, represent the Feast of [Purim](#) (late February or March) throughout the ages and throughout the world today. As part of the feast Jewish children read out the whole book of Esther as a memorial to being saved from persecution. In the painting one of them carries the scroll of the book of Esther. Mordecai also carries the scroll of Esther since, in Jewish tradition, he is the writer of the book.

But the story doesn't end there. Sadly, there is appalling revenge in the last three chapters. Mordecai arranges for the pre-emptive execution of 75,000 Persians the day the Jews were due to be exterminated.

Silvia and I had long discussions about how this matches with Jesus' command to love our enemies and to revoke revenge. We decided to portray the gallows, top right, as a cross.

Do you remember [Barabbas](#)? Barabbas was the revolutionary terrorist who was set free by Pontius Pilate when the crowd shouted for him to be saved, rather than Jesus. Jesus, the innocent one, died in his place.

Even the hated Haman, the archetypical persecutor, has a chance to be saved by the Jew from Nazareth, who takes his place on the imperial gallows and absorbs violence.

People in the Painting

Esther, Jewish Queen of Persia,
Orphaned, adopted, awesome,
Raised to the heights,
Reticent, persuasive, risk-taker,
'If I perish, I perish',
Bravely delivers her race,
From depths of death.

Xerxes, King of Persian Empire,
Reigns in citadel of Susa,
From India to Ethiopia,
Opulent, hospitable, terrifying,
Saved by Esther from murder,
Hears her pleas for her people.

Mordecai, cousin of Esther,
Foster-father, chronicler,
Honourably perceptive:
'Perhaps you have come
To royal dignity
For such a time as this?'

Haman, vizier of Xerxes,
Machiavellian murderer,
Plans destruction of Jews:
Snarler ensnared,
Worsted, reversed, hoisted,
Despised for ever.

Jewish children and families,
Throughout the ages,
Celebrate Purim,
Reading the scroll,
Feasting and sharing,
Remembering friendship and revenge.

Yet, the Jew of Nazareth
Enjoins love for enemies,
Endures imperial gallows,
Absorbing vengeance:
Death is destroyed by
Esther's successor at Easter.

Conclusion

[Tristan Latchford](#), at the end of his anthem 'Esther', echoes the opening bars of [Bach's Easter Oratorio](#), on the words 'Esther's successor at Easter'.

People have asked whether I sometimes change words in my poems. Concerning the first draft of 'Esther', Katie suggested I hadn't shown enough how terrifying Xerxes was and how awesome Esther was, in her bravery approaching him and pleading for her people. Hence those words in the final version.

On 30 January 2020, I showed this painting and read the poem at a meeting of the [Council of Christians and Jews](#), at Southwark Cathedral. One of the Rabbis present suggested to me afterwards that the Feast of Purim remembered friendship as well as revenge, and so I added the word friendship in the penultimate verse.

Earlier this month, I led the Diocese of Chelmsford Deacons retreat and preached at their Ordination services in Chelmsford Cathedral on 11 September. [Guli Francis-Dehqani](#), the new Bishop of Chelmsford, is Persian and she has recently written movingly of her background in [Cries for a Lost Homeland](#) (Canterbury Press, 2021).

Her father, [Hassan Dehqani-Tafti](#), was the first Iranian Anglican Bishop and in 1979 survived an assassination attempt on his life. Her mother, Margaret, the English daughter of Church Missionary Society missionaries, was injured in the attack. Her brother, Baram, was murdered a few months later by Revolutionary Guards. The family came to England as refugees and lived for a while at [Ridley Hall](#), Cambridge before moving to Winchester.

So, as we remember the courage of Esther we need to pray today for Jews throughout the world who are under pressure and persecution, for the small Church in Iran, and also for the release of [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), the Iranian and British dual citizen, who has been held under arrest in Iran since April 2016.

Dr Graham Kings is Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Ely. [Nourishing Connections](#) (Canterbury Press, 2020) includes the poems and paintings of Women in the Bible.