

9. August 2023

Come, we're going for our people

Est 4:17 k-m, r-t

Reading for the memorial of St Edith Stein

In those days Queen Esther took refuge with the Lord in the mortal peril which had overtaken her. She took off her sumptuous robes and put on sorrowful mourning. Instead of expensive perfumes, she covered her head with ashes and dung. She mortified her body severely, and the former scenes of her happiness and elegance were now littered with tresses torn from her hair. She besought the Lord God of Israel in these words: My Lord, our King, the Only One, come to my help, for I am alone and have no helper but you and am about to take my life in my hands. I have been taught from infancy in the bosom of my family that you, Lord, have chosen Israel out of all the nations and our ancestors out of all before them, to be your heritage for ever; and that you have treated them as you promised. Remember, Lord; reveal yourself in the time of our distress. As for me, give me courage, King of gods and Master of all powers! Put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion; change his feeling into hatred for our enemy, so that he may meet his end, and all those like him! As for ourselves, save us by your hand, and come to my help, for I am alone and have no one but you, Lord.

Today the Church commemorates St. Edith Stein, who is well known, at least in German-speaking countries. Edith Stein was born on 12 October 1891 in Breslau, and suffered martyrdom on 9 August 1942 in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz (Poland). Edith Stein was a Jew, a studied philosopher. Thanks to the works of St. Teresa of Avila, she found faith in Jesus and His holy Church. At the age of 42 she entered the Carmelite monastery in Cologne. She always kept her Jewish identity and, despite her conversion to Catholicism, she was persecuted by the Nazis, who deported her and her sister to Auschwitz, where they died in a gas chamber.

On the way to the concentration camp, Edith wrote the following words: "Even now I accept the death that God has prepared for me in complete submission and with joy as being His most holy will for me. I ask the Lord to accept my life and my death, for all the intentions of the most holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary and of the Holy Church,

especially for the preservation and sanctification of our holy Order, in reparation for the unbelief of the Jewish people, and so that the Lord will be accepted by His people and that His Kingdom may come in glory, for the salvation of Germany and the peace of the world. Finally for my relatives, living and deceased, and for all those whom God has entrusted to me: may none of them be lost."

One of her last sentences, spoken at the moment when the Gestapo arrived at the Carmel in Echt (Holland) to take her away for extermination, shows how deeply attached she felt to her Jewish roots. She told her sister: "*Come, Rosa, we're going for our people.*"

Edith Stein recognised that her vocation was to accept in her heart the sufferings of her people, offering them to God as atonement. In October 1938 she wrote these words: "I keep thinking of Queen Esther who was taken away from her people precisely because God wanted her to plead with the king on behalf of her nation. I am a very poor and powerless little Esther, but the King who has chosen me is infinitely great and merciful. This is great comfort."

This could be one of the reasons why the Church chose precisely the reading of the Book of Esther for her memorial. Edith Stein, a Jewish woman who consciously offered her life as a sacrifice for the Jews, is part of that series of heroic women we meet again and again: women like Queen Esther who, in the midst of their anguish and that of all the people, knew how to take refuge in God and only in Him. God then became their strength and was able to act through them.

We do not know what weight such a sacrifice, so intimately connected to the sacrifice of Jesus, will have in God's eyes; what is certain is that it must have immense value, precisely because it is so closely connected to the suffering of the Lord. When the Jews meet Jesus - and we are still waiting for the great awakening of Israel - it will surely also be because of the sacrifice of this saint.

When we are presented with such a shining example of life, the question of our own vocation knocks again at the door of our heart: What does the Lord want of us? How can we make our life as fruitful as possible? How can our prayer become so universal? What are the sacrifices that stand in our way?

Finally, let us look at some elements of Queen Esther's prayer, which could also be helpful for us:

First we see the aspect of penance, which involves depriving ourselves of certain things to make our prayer even more intense.

Then we see that Esther relies on God alone, knowing that no human being can help her.

In her prayer, Queen Esther remembers God's kindness to His people, but she also remembers the sins of the people, especially the sin of idolatry.

Esther then asks that the plans of their enemies may not be carried out: "Turn their desires against them", she says to the Lord.

Next, she asks for courage and the right words for what she intends: "Give me courage, King of gods and Master of all powers! Put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion."

Then Esther assures the Lord of the purity of her intentions...

All these elements have their place in our prayer. When we see how much anti-Christian darkness is increasing and how much confusion is growing in the world, it is particularly important that we pray that the plans of the enemies may not be realised. Evil will not triumph, even if it presents itself as omnipotent! It will be God who will carry out His plans!

Even the cruel death of St. Edith Stein, which seemed to be a triumph of evil, became a victory of love on the Cross, by her surrender to Christ.

Precisely at this time, when we are confronted with dark morasses even in the Church, it is necessary to pray with strength and authority and to keep our gaze fixed and undivided on God. We cannot give in to despair! Although we must perceive the dangers and recognise the influence of evil, it is important not to dwell on this area at all times, nor to give too much importance to the constant negative news.

Queen Esther's prayer shows us the way forward... and God listened to her!