

Courage in the Time of Crisis

There is a you tube video going viral – of a Heidi Mond in Germany who had been spearheading a drive to curtail the influence of Islam in her country, when recently at a concert intended as an ecumenical approach to bring various religions together, she brought a rolled up cloth banner to the concert, not really sure of what she would do, though the banner had the German colors and the words of *Jesus as Lord* on it. When the opening prayer was begun in Arabic by the invited Imam with a call to prayer, chanting and claiming Allah alone, Heidi called out from the balcony to set the stage of religion right: what was coming on was not rapprochement but a chant that in a later she recalled is used in the killing of non-believers and innocent people. She let it be known that Germany was founded on Christianity, though in her specifics she began with Martin Luther, not with St Boniface the Apostle to Germany much earlier. Regardless, she is ostensibly a courageous woman. As expected, she was ironically escorted out of the church dedicated as – the Church of the reformation - in Speyer. She “was just prepared for what God wanted her to do.” A “holy anger” was rising within her. Thereupon she burst out that “Jesus Christ is Lord in Germany” and warned the audience of the lie and danger of allowing Islam to displace Christianity.

Notwithstanding the association of Nazism in an earlier mid-20th century upheaval of Europe coming from Germany, nor the question one might raise about the historical knot that entangled Luther with the Catholic inquisitors, nor taking up the issue of Islam-Christian détente or irrevocable enmity, questions that can be honestly and fruitfully

addressed, the woman in this drama of sorts was surely one of conviction, not of emotion. Her strength sprang from love of the Lord and indeed she seemed to have no disposition to violence at all. She used an opportunity, driven by prayer and grace to speak out. She later interviewed how her fear to become involved shifted to courage as she felt strengthened while resting in the Lord.

Just under 2500 years ago again in the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon under the power of Xerxes, the story of Esther arises, a woman of great courage and obedience, of foresight and allegiance to her people. Esther was a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, and who through plan and fate was chosen to be the most desired Queen of all in Xerxes household. But at that time a wily and proud man named Haman concocted the scheme to deceive the king into signing a decree to wipe out the Jews throughout the land. He was recently made second in the kingdom and hated the Jew Mordecai, who refused to reverence him as a god. If successful he would cause the first Holocaust, 2500 hundred years before Hitler's Reich.

The one person who could save their people was Esther, who it was arranged would come into the presence of the king and arranging a way to foil the plans of the edict which he had already signed. But to come into his presence uninvited meant death, regardless of her status as Queen. And she had not been summoned for 30 days. Yet, prodded on by cousin Mordecai he told her *"Realize that perhaps it was for a time like this that you rose to be queen"* she mustered the courage even to die if that is what

risking telling the king of the real plot entailed: “If I perish, I perish.” What to do when caught between a rock and a hard place?

Imagine the situation how our first reading immerses her in the drama of life and death. Even though she has chosen to live very simply she is surrounded by opulence and a king who approves of her and yet is duped into destroying a people, all because of Haman’s pride. . It was up to her to expose Haman and his treachery or shy away and miss the chance to save thousands of lives of her people. Therefore she is “seized with mortal anguish.” Anguish unto death. Her people are, on the outside of the palace fasting and praying as does she, “prostrate on the ground,” as the reading relates. Recalling words of the prophets, even the Lord Himself to the call of Moses: *“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, blessed are you.” Help me who am alone and have no help but you, for I am taking my life into my hand!.... Put in my mouth persuasive words in the presence of the lion and turn his heart to hatred for our enemy... turn our mourning into gladness and our sorrows into wholeness.”*

Let’s look at this sublime prayer which captures her Jewish tradition still very strong in the people by the first 50 years of exile in Babylon. This is a woman of courage, this is a woman of tradition, this is a woman of prayer, ready to die for her country, her people, God’s chosen people. “I am taking my life into my hands.” She prayed for the wisdom to act virtuously and craftily at the same time. Jesus would later evoke the same sentiment: to be innocent as doves but cunning as serpents.

Like Esther, Heidi Mond, the Lutheran German woman in the You Tube video that went viral, loved the tradition of her country, not just the outward architectural and artistic expressions but essentially the Christian foundation that she saw was largely being eroded. Esther must have seen that too in the secularization of society under the Babylonian exile.

Esther's prayer contains these words "As a child I used to hear from the texts of my forefathers, that you O Lord always free those who are pleasing to you." Heidi prayed for the freedom that Christianity brought her country, summarizing that Christ is the Lord. It was about religious freedom that ignited the spark of courage to stand up and be counted in that auditorium. Like Esther she did not just jump into the picture, but prayed for exceptional divine guidance.

Regardless of the important differences that play into the scene, tactics, tenets of faith, historical interpretations of the past, etc., one must nonetheless admire deeply the courage, prayerfulness and standing up for something that matters, and in the case of Esther at least she was willing to die for: to defend innocent life in her case, and the religion of her people; and in Heidi's example, an outcry against the erosion of Christian rootedness and the rise of a foreign hostile religion supplanting it.

Truth becomes a commodity rather than a driving force in a world that relativizes values, even faith, religion, and life itself. When one is put to the test and faith demands an allegiance not to be broken, the courage to stand up and be counted is becoming an endangered species. And how it warms the spirit to see it on display. In both these instances, however,

these women rest not on their own self-worth, even their self-mastery but on their God. They point to God placed in the context of a history that shows His long-proven ***protection*** with earlier examples from which the courageous can hold up in esteem. One marvels at the tenacity and courage of St Paul – ridicule, betrayal, persecution, left half dead after stoning and up again, shipwrecked, chained to a filthy dungeon closed off from life and light, and ever finding the path as water flows to its gravity pull – or better, even swimming upstream - so Paul found every angle possible to him to right the wrong and bring people to God through Christ into whom he states he is absorbed: ***“for me to live is Christ.”***

Philippians 1:12-14 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Amidst the wonderful examples of courage are our men and women who have fought overseas; firefighters who risk their lives for others to rescue them. I would like to single out groups who speak against the politically correct tide, to defend those whose lives are threatened in the womb as well as at the end of life. I am thinking of a group called the ***Survivors***, young men and women, and even late teens, who stand up for life as they witness on the streets and in campuses, but risk arrest for doing nothing violent. Like Heidi and Esther they are not afraid to speak out. They tell a

nation that sees abortion as a quick fix that this kills, that social justice in whatever realm it is undertaken begins first in the womb – biologically, philosophically, and in the order of events that unfold. Carrying signs and conveying a message that is stark, and even ugly, the real face of “choice” as the torn apart babies, the eye to eye window of truth, not sugar-coated, but starkly real raises sensitivities, quite understandably. Dormant currents begin to swell up and in some cases may rage. They don’t dwell on this, but they don’t skip over presenting it either as it is a teachable tool. Remember Gen Eisenhower had the local Germans come and see what the death camps left after the torture and slaughter of Dachau. These young people know: they are survivors in a holocaust that has allowed 57 million of their brothers and sisters to perish during more than 40 years of legalized abortion Queen Esther realized there was something bigger than even her life to save: the life of her country. Heidi realized there was a war against Christianity brewing and she had to stand up for it, and will most likely continue and bring others in encouragement into the fray. The Survivors community of spiritually mature men and women recognize that they could have been part of the modern holocaust, and pray to God and call to others for the legal return of the guaranteed right to live, from womb to tomb in our law as consuming priority, yes, as the civil rights movement of our day. Mixed with that courage, prayerful guidance and rootedness in a *God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time*, as Th Jefferson would say, these people also know compassion for those who, like that king in the Esther story have already been sold a bill of goods that are anything but good, and have been duped by a culture that dismisses

justice for self-centered pleasure and coins it as “choice,” or if already dealing with justice forgets that social justice begins in the womb.

Not all are called to non-violent courageous debate in the streets and campuses as is the case with these groups just described. But we are all called to wear our faith on our sleeves. To stand up and be counted. Presently there is a call all around the US and 20 other countries for 40days for life, a campaign during Lent and in the Fall each year. Over the last decade some 600,000 participants, 16,000 churches, 522 cities, 8,245 lives saved, 88 abortion workers quit, 48 abortion centers closed. Not closed down by law, nor by violence, but by prayer and persuasion and loving presence! Not about judging – it’s about saving; not about trespassing, it’s about rescuing from death. Check out their website: 40daysforlife.com; and ours too while you’re at it: priestsforlife.org.

Make this a Lenten exercise that means something for others. Call them and make time if only an hour a week until Easter. This is wearing faith in public which in turn grows courage. Join them in silent, non-confrontational atmosphere, praying for mother, baby, and even the abortionist doctors and their aides. Incidentally, as an appendix to the Esther story even the king came around to revere the Jews because of the courage of his Queen who resonated for us her praise: **Lord on the day I called for help you answered me.!**