

The same weight that everyone has

The soul and the harp / 4 – Understanding the weight of God and the glory of man

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*Stuck
between deadly things
(the starry skies
will also end)
Why do I crave God?*

Giuseppe Ungaretti, Damnation

Prayer is an essential and universal dimension of human life. Psalm 4 reveals this to us, and offers us a sense of great hope in these difficult times.

«Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and

hear my prayer» (Psalm 4,1). *Save me from these narrow spaces, oh God.* We learn words one at a time. In these times of pandemic, when our spaces have *suddenly drastically been reduced*, we can understand the metaphor with which Psalm 4 begins. Perhaps only those who are accustomed to freer horizons and now find themselves in a forced state of distress will be truly able to discover the infinite value of «endless spaces».

This psalm is the prayer of a man who is going through a great difficulty that is putting him in a *tight spot*: «How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?» (Psalm 4,2). *How long?* This question is often asked in the Bible by those who find themselves in a non-transitory condition of anguish. It is the question of the sentry who still awaits the distant dawn in the middle of the night; of those, who are stuck in a trap, plunged into misfortune, and can only ask God and life: how long? How long until dawn? When will this violence end? This praying man was attacked by slanderers, by lying people who accused him of non-existent and serious faults. The man in the psalm is a victim.

The key word here is glory: *kavod/kabod* in Hebrew. It is one of the most important words in the Bible, of its theology, which in the psalm also becomes a word of its anthropology. This man feels offended in his glory, he feels stripped of his honour (synonym of glory). Glory is what you see, what appears in front of your eyes, and is therefore closely related to how others look at us. It is a word connected to our eyes and gaze. For the ancient man, more radically than for us, identity was constitutively relational. I am what others can see and recognize in me. Fame or reputation is a fundamental dimension of life, as are honour and glory. At the same time, the denial of honour is the denial of something intimate: even if it concerns seeing, honour has nothing to do with appearing but with being, it is an attribute of the soul. This is why slander and lies that take away honour and glory deprive men and women of their dignity. As true yesterday, as it is today when the deprivation of honour can also stem from being denied the right to work or when your glory disappears along with your company gone bankrupt. Honour is perhaps one of, if not the most intimate thing we possess, but it also one of the things that is most affected and depends on the words and looks from those around us. It is the mystery of every person, living his or her inner and external world within this essential link. The substantial nature of this relationship makes us human beings radically vulnerable and greatly exposed to the gaze of others. Because if "I am what you do to me", then you are "hurting me" can reach as deeply inside as you are "good for me".

In the Bible, the word *kavod* refers to weight. The glory of God has weight because YHWH is consistent, true and real. On the opposite side, there is only a void, breath, *vanitas*, the hevel of Qoheleth, which does not have weight because it is inconsistent. *Kavod* is the *anti-Hevel*. The idol is a nothing (the other meaning of hevel in the writings of the prophets), it weighs nothing and it is not worthy of glory because it has no substance. In that ancient world, only that which exists has any weight. God is spirit and yet his glory is heavy. However, this psalm reminds us that not only God, but man has his own glory too. Every denial of respect for the honour and glory of another human being begins by denying his or her consistency, his or her value - the first ancient coins were units measuring weight (lire, talents...). Every person on the planet has the same moral weight, no man or woman weighs more or less than another, because the honour of every human being is infinite.

This is why the Bible uses the same word to express both the glory of God, as well as the glory of man. In order to truly understand this, we need to go back to Genesis. In biblical humanism, Adam is blessed with glory, honour and weight, *kavod* because God had it first, which he transmits while creating him. All men and women must be respected and honoured because they have weight, i.e. importance, in the eyes of God. They are the «image and likeness» of Elohim, and the *image* of an infinite value has infinite value. It is a heavy image because it is consistent, because it is not mere shadow and wind. It is what weighs and matters the most "under the sun". At the same time, to dishonour man is to dishonour God; denying men and women their glory means denying it to God. Because if it is true that we have learned to glorify and honour people from glorifying and honouring God, it is equally true that it was by looking at the dignity and honour of human beings that we have learned to recognize the dignity and honour of God. The religion of a people is also an indicator of their humanism: the most beautiful and elevated true words about God arise only from communities that also know how to say beautiful and elevated words about men and women. And when good words for God are not accompanied by equally good words for men and women, religions turn into in-humanism, where in order to praise the gods they humiliate human beings. God is the glory of man, man is the glory of God.

It should come as no surprise that the same word (*kavod*) is found in the heart of the Ten Commandments: «Honour your father and your mother» (Deuteronomy 5,16). Honour, give glory, give *weight* to your parents: remember that, even here, you are a child. During this pandemic, despite all the mistakes, we have really tried to honour our fathers and mothers to the best of our abilities. We did not consider them a burden but gave them weight, importance. And without knowing it, in restricting our spaces, together we rediscovered and resurrected the collective space and the common good of the Fourth Commandment - we had forgotten the Bible, but the Bible had not forgotten us. Job, at the peak of his night, exclaimed: «He has stripped me of my honour!» (Job 19,9). Job directs this cry of his directly to God, whom he feels is his executioner. And, while there are still many who, in the past as well as today, cry out to God to impute the loss of their honour, and thus do not lose their faith (there is a good place in the Bible for them too), Psalm 4 shows us another form of crying. That of someone in the middle of a disaster who feels that there is Someone who still believes in his glory and in his honour: «Know: that the Lord hears when I call to him» (Psalm 4,4). Faith is also the confident belief that, when no one else sees our dignity anymore, there is still a place where its weight has not lost even an ounce of its significance. This is where the nature of the gift of faith truly emerges: to find within oneself that gaze that is able to see an honour denied by everyone else, to feel that someone recognizes our glory even when everyone else only see *vanitas*, is a heritage of inestimable value.

Many people go through their lives accompanied by the gaze of just a few different people – and at least one - capable of seeing a dignity, honour and glory that others are not able to see. Without these special gazes, life would simply be too sad to bear. However, we all know that the "horizontal" gaze of those around us does not last forever. Some leave us, some "change" their eyes and gaze, some get lost or we lose them. And even those few whose fate it is to die under one of these gazes, if their existence is long enough and true, eventually still realise that there is a depth of the depths in our soul that no human gaze can reach - not even ours. It is the place where our first and last words are kept, where the pains that we never told anyone rest, all the ineffable joys, the moans too delicate and precious to be able to relate to anyone, not even to our hearts.

This is the "wine cellar" that the eyes of faith are able to reach. Prayer is to find oneself in the conditions of the meekness and mildness that allow this different gaze to reach us in that unknown inner territory of ours. Before asking, begging, pleading, thanking, prayer is to be reached and seen within a different kind of intimacy. And even those who do not call these eyes by the name of God can sometimes feel this gaze «in the best and deepest part of my being, what I call God» (Etty Hillesum). Every one of us

can feel touched in this unfathomable depth. The world would be too unfair if only those who received the gift of faith could feel seen in this abyss of the heart. There are many more prayers than there are believers, because *experiencing* God is something very different from the mere name by which we call him. I would not be interested in a God who only looks at those who also look at him, because he would be less worthy than those fathers and mothers who throughout their lives, continue to see and call those children, who have forgotten about them and no longer call, by their names too. This too, is universal brotherhood.

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«You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound» (Psalm 4,7). The happiness that comes from an inhabited interior space is perhaps the greatest wealth there is. As those who have found themselves in a hospital ward these days, without their loved ones, without their friends, without certainties. And there, in that abyss of solitude and fear, they suddenly felt that spirituality, cultivated for a whole lifetime, suddenly emerge inside. Cultivated so that it could flourish in those terrible moments, for many the last ones, when it becomes a good for which there are no substitutes to rival it. Who knows how many invisible angels, mixed with demons, are filling our hospitals right now. Some have seen these angels and recognized them, because they had not made them flee after their youth, when God and the angels easily fade away. Because somewhere in their adult heart they asked them to stay, they tied them to the bedside table with the last Ave Maria that they remembered and they never stopped acting. We can forget everything but we must not forget all the prayers, because we will need one to say our last amen well: «In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety» (Psalm 4,9).