

## It is not good for God to be alone

### The soul and the harp/ 7 - Our human resemblance to God somewhere between "surely" and "yet"

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*"And when I watch the stars burn in the sky;*

*I say to myself thinking:*

*What is the purpose of all these small flames?*

*That make the air infinite, and that infinite*

*depth serene? What does this immense solitude mean?*

*And who am I?"*

**Giacomo Leopardi**, Night song of a wandering shepherd from Asia (Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia)

**Biblical anthropology is a global common good of humanity. Psalm 8 also reminds us of this, while continuing to amaze us with its extraordinary prophetic beauty.**

Some people remember the day they first saw the starry sky all their lives. They had "seen" it before, but on a blessed night something special happened and then they really saw it. They had that metaphysical experience of its immensity and simultaneously felt all their own smallness and fragility. They saw themselves, we saw ourselves, as infinitely small. And there, under that firmament, a host of different questions flourished, the kind of questions that mark a new and decisive stage in life once they arrive: Where is and what is my business? My problems? What is my life about? My affections, my pains? And then, the most difficult question of all: what about me, what am I? It is a terrible and beautiful day; for some it marks the beginning of a religious search, for others the end of their first faith and the beginning of atheism - only to discover, but only at the end, that the two experiences are similar. That perhaps there really was a lot of mystery in the atheist answers, and a lot of illusion in the religious ones as well, we just could not see it. Not everyone has this experience, but if we wish to, we can try to leave home during these evenings made so much calmer and clearer after these few sabbatical months, look for the stars, stay silent, and wait for the questions - which, someone told me, sometimes arrive.

For others, there was a different decisive day. When that infinitely small being suddenly experienced that that "Love that moves the sun and the stars" was interested in precisely him, or her, sought him out, spoke to him, met her. An equally decisive day, because the true experience of the day of truly seeing the stars is not enough for a religious life to begin. Many people have truly heard the spirit of God vibrating in nature, heard his voice ringing on starry nights and in many other places, yet never felt themselves actually being called by name by that very same voice. As there are others who have had an authentic personal encounter with the voice inside, but who have never really heard or felt it being alive in the whole universe, who have never been moved by recognizing it in the immensity of the cosmos. It is the meeting between these two days that marks the beginning of a mature spiritual life, when the immensity that reveals our infinite smallness becomes more intimate than our name.

I believe that the author of Psalm 8 experienced both of these days. He recognized the presence of YHWH in the infinitely large firmament and felt infinitely small; and then he sensed that the voice that spoke to him between the galaxies was the same voice that spoke to him in his heart: «LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?» (Psalm 8,2-5). Wonderful verses. We should have Francis's heart and stigmata to really be able to sing them.

We are witnessing a direct experience of the absolute. That ancient poet felt the immensity and smallness, did not feel crushed, and began a new song. A song of true humility (*humilitas*), because *humus* tells us who we really are only if we can look at him from a sidereal distance for a moment; the *adamah* (earth) will reveal Adam only when viewed from above. This is the joy for the truth that has finally revealed itself, for a new ignorance that does not humiliate. Humility is the opposite of humiliation. And hence we experience a new childhood, a boundless youth: «of children and infants» (Psalm 8,2).

At the centre of the psalm lies a question: what is the son of man (*Ben Adam*: an expression dear to the prophets and the gospels), faced with such immensity?! And the answer is splendid: despite his insignificance in relation to the stars and his smallness in time and space, you take care of man, you remember him. As if to say: if you took into account, O God, what Adam really is objectively in relation to the exterminated universe, you would not occupy yourself with him; but instead you take care of him, of her. Hence, the necessary question: but this voice that speaks to me from within, is it the same one that has spoken through the galaxies? The answer of the first day can only be a resounding yes, otherwise the journey cannot begin! But over time, the answer becomes: maybe. Then come the long years in between when the answer is: no. Finally, the yes returns, but - if and when it returns - it is a yes said with a different depth and a new humility. A new wonder is born, gratitude overflows and the prayer of recent times resurfaces.

It is in this tension between the stars and our heart, both inhabited by the same presence, that the dignity of Adam, his sons and his daughters, his glory and his honour live. We get lost in the various ideologies when we lose one of these two poles. We must read Psalm 8 in parallel with the first chapters of Genesis: «So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them» (Genesis 1,27). The Bible verse that, perhaps, I love the most. Adam is placed by Elohim in the center of the garden of creation to be its custodian and responsible for it. The Psalm tells us again: «You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet» (Psalm 8,6). Adam becomes the first interlocutor of God, and through this reciprocity he can also keep God company in his solitude – «It is not good for the man to be alone» (Genesis 2,18), should be read together with the other sentence not written in the Bible, but equally present: it is not good for God to be alone.

It would not surprise me if the author of that ancient psalm, while singing, had these very verses from Genesis at hand. Perhaps he was meditating and contemplating "what is man" when, at a certain point, he no longer could hold the emotion within and composed one of the most beautiful verses on man ever written in all of religious and secular literature. After seeing him as an *aeternitatis sub species*, after going to the moon in his soul and having lost sight of him in all his smallness, while returning to those words in Genesis, he suddenly saw a different man. And he pronounced this masterpiece, which should be read after a few moments of silence: «And yet you have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour» (Psalm 8,5). And yet: sometimes the Bible knows how to enclose all its prophecy in one single humble conjunction. We are ephemeral, we are like grass ... and yet ... «A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall... Surely the people are grass» (Isaiah 40,6-7). Surely ... and yet. We have been thought, sought out and loved between a surely and a yet. Surely ephemeral like grass, surely infinitely small, surely unfaithful and sinners; and yet we are a little less than God, while yet in his image and likeness, yet loved, cared for and expected as children.

This is the immense biblical anthropology. Ancient literature knew the metaphor of the image of God applied to man, but it was really only used for the king, for the pharaoh. The Bible uses it for each and every one of us, for every man and for every woman, for you, and for me. Adam, all Adams, are the

image and likeness of Elohim; and so we are too, all of us. This is the magna carta of every declaration of rights of man and woman, of boys and girls, of the dignity of creation. Psalm 8 is a hymn to God and at the same time a hymn to man. It exalts human beings by telling us who the God of whom they are the image of is, and it exalts God by telling us who the man and woman who reflect him are. Because if one is an image of the other, the more Adam becomes beautiful the more he speaks of the beauty of his Creator, and the more we freely let God become better than us, the more we embellish ourselves. We cannot understand biblical anthropology if we leave out the reciprocity intrinsic to the symbolism of this image.

But the beauty and strength of this song explodes if we imagine the psalmist singing that verse number 5, while also reading chapters three and four of Genesis: those chapters on disobedience, on the winning seduction of the snake, and then on Cain and the blood of Abel, which the psalmist was still able to smell. It is too simple to sing to the glory and honour of man and then stopping at chapter number two. The real challenge is to be able to continue the song as the chapters continue and you enter the dark and very dark pages of the no, those on the breaking of the harmony between man-woman-creation-God, the pages on the expulsion from that wonderful garden, those on the night obscured by the first fratricide on earth. When you get there, do not stop singing. And then continue with the terrible scream of Lamech the killer of children, with the rebellion of Babel, with the sins of the patriarchs, with the lies and deceptions of Jacob, with the murder of the Benjaminites, until the murder of David, to the infidelities of Solomon and of almost all the kings of Israel. Never stop singing: «Surely ... and yet you made him a little lower than God».

All the strength and power of biblical anthropology is released when we manage to overcome the pain and shame by repeating "surely ... and yet" not only in front of the firmament but also in prisons, immersed in meanness, in violence, in the slums of Calcutta, in the Via Crucis leading to Golgotha. There is no human condition that is not enclosed between that *surely* and *yet*, nobody remains outside. The Bible was not afraid to tell us about the sins and baseness of its men because it truly believed in the image of Elohim. And every time we hide the darkest pages in our stories, it means we have effectively stopped believing that we are made in his image.

Cain cancelled his own brotherhood and his children continue to cancel it by killing Abel every day. He could not, however, erase the image - what if the "sign of Cain" was really the image of Elohim? «Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!