

The indispensable custody

The soul and the harp/ 8 - The prophets provide words to those who must defend themselves against the masters of all words

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"Each line was bristling with words of many syllables that he did not understand. He was sitting on the bed and had the dictionary which was larger than the book in front of him... and for some time he entertained the thought of reading nothing but the dictionary, until he became master of all the words it contained".

Jack London, *Martin Eden*

Words are the protagonist of Psalm 12, even the unpronounceable ones. They are one of the greatest sources of power available to humans. But also one of the strongest

temptations of any power. The embankment of un-pronounceability.

Many forms of poverty are also a poverty of the ability to speak. An indigence, which prevents you from calling your own pain and that of others by name. This sort of narrative poverty sometimes precedes material and moral poverty; in other instances, it follows them, always in tandem. The "peasants" and the oppressed of all times were peasants and oppressed also and above all due to the words that they could not say and those used by the powerful that they did not know or could not understand. That is why every form of poverty that seeks to rise must learn and relearn to speak again, until at least one poor person will be able to start naming the demons of his or her indigence. This also includes the beautiful invitation from our grandparents: "Luigino, study"; they knew very well that knowing the words of the lords was the first step towards liberation.

The Bible, teacher and guardian of the word, knows its many natures, it has seen its paradise, it has glimpsed its hell. It saw it, in the beginning, while creating the world; it watched it becoming a child again, and was amazed and moved. While chasing it in between genesis and *eskaton*, it learned the ambivalent grammar of human words. It saw it, while in Jacob's mouth, then in David's, that most beloved king but capable of killing with one single lying word, and finally in Mary's beautiful mouth. Then it followed it in silence to the mountain where the word became a cry. In the midst of many difficulties and failures, it learned how to recognize it as good in the mouth of true prophets and as evil on that of false prophets. It understood that the word is the point of contact between God and man. It is the place where the human and the divine speak face-to-face and each becomes increasingly similar to the other. We are the "image" of Elohim in many things, but above all, when we add a sense of order to the world by expressing it with words, when we raise others and ourselves with a word that is finally different, when we hurt and kill others and ourselves with a wrongful word.

We were already the image of God in the caves and mobile tents of the Neolithic period, but we became more so because of the billions of good and beautiful words that we learned to repeat to each other every day. Only gods and men can speak. There is, furthermore, an intimate and essential relationship between the word and the truth, which perhaps only the Bible (and a few great poets) can explain to us. Truth is the soul of the word. Just like the soul it does not appear on the surface, it does not show itself, for many it does not even exist. When the word loses contact with the truth it loses its

soul - or sells it to the devil. The word is the protagonist of Psalm 12, a psalm on the word and therefore on prophecy: «Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. Everyone lies to their neighbour; they flatter with their lips but harbour deception in their hearts» (Psalm 12,2-3).

Loyalty, sincerity, lies: it is all a matter of words. The psalmist's is certain that loyalty has all but disappeared from the earth - or at least from his life. This is a stage that inevitably arrives in the life of any man of faith, especially in that of the prophets. Because, as they live closely within the relationship between the received and given word, they are particularly sensitive to the truth of their own words and those of others. They are words made flesh, always finding themselves between nothing and infinity, witnesses of the weak force of a breath that is ephemeral yet capable of overcoming death. They are sentinels able to see the soul of words in the night. Those who pray have a great resemblance to the prophets: both live by the truth of the word, both are beggars for the echo of whispered or shouted words, and neither are masters of the words nor, least of all, of the return of their echo. Hence, they are also radically vulnerable to the manipulation of the word, to lies. Sometimes they are convinced that they are surrounded only by lies. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the prophet to insert his own lack of loyalty and sincerity among all the loyalty and sincerity that has disappeared from the earth. Because it is not part of the repertoire of an honest prophet to feel like the only righteous survivor in the world: the first non-sincerity that he feels is his own. It is not easy to get out of these spiritual traps of depression, but it is not impossible.

The psalmist sees and sings a crucial aspect of the lie: "lying to each other". When the lie takes over a community - some types of lies take the form of a virus - they become reciprocal. The opposite of the new commandment ("love one another") it is not only the conflict: it is also the reciprocal lie. Because just as love "does not forgive" a loved one by generating reciprocity, neither does the lie often forgive those who are touched by it. It spreads, it multiplies, it searches for its own kind, producing its own perverse company where each person feeds on the lies of others and his or her own. Few things are able to feed us more than our lies, which by dint of telling them we end up believing are true: losing moral weight day by day without realizing it. A typical form of lie stigmatized by the psalm is adulation: "flattering lips". The Book of Proverbs knows and speaks of this as well: «Those who flatter their neighbors are spreading nets for their feet» (Proverbs 29,5). Among the many forms of flattery, that of a friend is in fact particularly dangerous and subtle.

This adulation is not the kind that comes from a false friend (which exists as well). Unlike the fake-friend ruffian, the flattering friend does not praise us in pursuit of his or her own interests, but due to a strange form of pity for us. He knows he is saying an untrue word, but says it anyway to please us. Flattery is very frequent in any request for appreciation: we have no real reasons to sincerely appreciate the work or action of a friend, but we decide to satisfy his request by giving him a false note of appreciation. We prefer emotional assonance to the truth in the words. And so, we "spread nets for their feet". Because instead of digging into that relationship and looking for a real reason to harbor and express sincere esteem, we settle for a fake sort of currency passing it off as legitimate. The relationship then begins to regress, the word loses its truth, and the friendship loses its soul. Moreover, as the Psalm says, the heart begins to harbor deception: a sincere heart that stays silent and a non-sincere heart that praises. The heart deceives, a friendship goes awry and over time, the lying heart contaminates and spoils what is good. Whoever finds a friend finds a treasure; whoever finds one who is not a flatterer finds two.

However, the grammar of the word contained in the Psalm does not end here: «Those who say, "By our tongues we will prevail; our own lips will defend us - who is lord over us?"» (Psalm 12,4). Our tongue is our strength: here we find ourselves in another essential dimension of the word. The one directly linked to power, to those who, feeling like the masters of all words and their soul, believe that they have no other master than themselves. Those who can speak and use words well easily dominate and oppress those who cannot speak or cannot speak well - we see it every day. The prohibition to pronounce the name of God in vain, enclosed in the Decalogue (Exodus 20.7), is also a protective device against any attempt to know all words and therefore command everything and everyone. It is the temptation of magic, but also of those who aim to become masters of all words. The fight against idolatry in the Bible also translates into making a word inaccessible and unpronounceable, because if a word cannot be commanded with a word, then its masters will always only be partial masters even when they feel that they are absolute masters. A name in the Bible always speaks of mystery.

Here, the psalm then denounces the temptation, always strong and at times invincible, of those who use words to build their own cult, their own religion. If "word" is one of the names of God, then the power over words is always a religious power. This is also where we find the root of the ancient and ever current project of Babel, where the construction of a unique and total language becomes the tool for building an absolute empire, without "any master". Each empire, including ours, begins by aspiring to give a name to that one unpronounceable word, and thus ends up turning into a new idolatry-religion, smaller and less free than the one it initially wished to overcome by occupying all its names and words. Any religion where the masters know all the words, where there is not even one left hidden in a cloud of mystery, becomes an empire that while wanting to pronounce all the names cannot even say one of them well.

The religious man is the first to be tempted by wanting to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of all the names of heaven and earth. Adam can and must name the animals but cannot name God. This is the only name that can only be revealed and then veiled again by the same revealer, because in the custody of the name of God lies the custody of our individual names as well. «"Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise," says the LORD. "I will protect them from those who malign them"» (Psalm 12,5). The psalmist prays that the Lord comes to the rescue of his testimony. The prophet bears witness to the poor oppressed by the power of words. Those who, by vocation, are competent in matters of the word, those who know its soul, can - must - use it to testify in favor of those who do not know enough words to save themselves.

Thus, we understand the civil value of prophecy: the prophets are those who provide words to those who must defend themselves from the masters of all words. Writers, poets, journalists, politicians, trade unionists, artists, lawyers, all participate in the same prophetic function as Isaiah and Amos if they bear witness to the oppressed by the word in the courts of history. A poor man is someone who does not know enough words to be able to call upon all the spirits of his life and thus, not knowing their name, cannot drive them away either. The prophets, and their friends, call the demons who threaten the poor by name, and then send them away. And so, each day, the word becomes flesh again while repeating to Lazarus: "Come forth".