

The womb of the different seed

The soul and the harp/19 – In times of trial we come to say to the Father: "Be faithful, remember yourself"

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"Only the word of man in response to the word of God, which in essence is a "no", attests to human freedom. This is why the freedom to say no is the foundation of history"

Jacob Taubes, Occidental Eschatology

Reciprocity is the blessing and curse of our pacts and promises. We are made of reciprocity, we desire and hope for it after our gifts, we await it in the form of esteem after having delivered the result of our work, and no love can flourish in fullness if at some point it does not become mutual love. When Christianity

wanted to synthesize the message of Jesus in a single law, it found nothing better than a command of reciprocity - "love one another". In Christian humanism, love remains imperfect until it produces more love in return. Agape, in its must-be essence, is to love and be loved. This seal of mutuality indelibly inscribed in the heart of each person and of communities, generates a radical indigence of gratitude and recognition, and therefore of anticipation and expectations of reciprocity that often come close to being pretentious. We do not check the esteem of others or their gratitude, but without it, we feel divided, dissatisfied and incomplete.

This is why a lot of unhappiness, frustration and even violence ends up being played out on the very edge between desire and expectation, hope and demand, freedom and obligation. Those who, after having learned the grammar of many reciprocities throughout their life, after having infinitely loved and understood it as the bread and water of important relationships, and one day manage to learn to go beyond reciprocity, to live even without that bread and water, those are the ones that learn the art of living well. That is when an age of a new poverty and an adult meekness begins; a time of happy meekness begins. Because we understand that our dignity is greater than any reciprocity, and that no reciprocity can satiate our thirst and hunger for infinity, which will accompany us, in crescendo, throughout our lives. And that we have to accept the few reciprocities as a pure gift and amazement.

«I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. "Steadfast love will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness." "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: 'I will establish your offspring forever'» (Psalm 89,1-4).

The beginning of the Psalm recalls a wedding rite, or a covenant between two people, where each one says their promise and builds the covenant as an encounter of two "forever". Then, in the name of the people, the hymn of love is raised: «Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones... Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who exult in your name all the day» (Psalm 89,5-16). Hence, the psalm reminds God of his promise: «Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said: "I have granted help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him... I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens... I will not remove from

him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips"» (Psalm 89,19-34). Words that are very similar to those that we find on the lips of the prophet Nathan in the Second Book of Samuel (chap. 7), which perhaps the psalmist was inspired by, along with the Babylonian poems (including the *Enuma Elish*). Parole simili a quelle che ritroviamo sulla bocca del profeta Natan nel Secondo Libro di Samuele (cap. 7), alle quali forse il salmista si è ispirato, insieme ai poemi babilonesi (tra questi l'*Enuma Elis*).

And it is here, precisely in verse 38, where the dramatic center of the psalm can be found. When, after repeating one's love and reminding God of his, the adversative preposition "but now you" gives a twist to the song and reveals its true meaning: «But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust... You have made his splendor to cease and cast his throne to the ground. You have cut short the days of his youth» (Psalm 89,38-44). Here we have exile, the rock where the history of salvation was broken, the *vanitas-mist* that wrapped the promise, the sword that severed that pact of reciprocity. A Psalm composed in Babylon, when the great test of Israel was the (almost) certainty that her God had forgotten the Covenant. The prophets interpreted the exile as a necessary consequence of the unfaithfulness of the people - to remind us that it is always very difficult to cross our exiles and come out of them while still innocent in our soul. However, it was also in the midst of those religious ruins that the most sublime prayer in the Bible was born, Israel learned to pray differently.

The words that form the backbone of the song are *hesed* and *emét*. *Hesed* is a dimension of love that above all recalls loyalty in lasting relationships. It is loyal love, which therefore borders on fidelity and reliability, that is, with *emét*. *Emét* refers to *truth and fidelity*, and has the same root as *'aman* (to believe), *emunah* (faith) and *amen* (it is true, I believe) the word with which this psalm ends. At the basis of *emét* there is an idea of solidity, of truth as evidence, of "shoring up" (which is the first meaning of the verb *'aman*). There is a hidden meaning to this even in the Hebrew alphabet: *emét* is composed of three letters that each rest firmly on two "legs", while the word "false", *seqer* rests on a single point, staggering, highly unstable. This is biblical faith, which unlike the Greek and later faith of Enlightenment is not a cognitive act of reason aimed at believing in principles or entities, but an acknowledgment of a reality that has its intrinsic and concrete evidence-truth. Our hands and feet are the first instruments of this faith.

The overlap between these two words, which move within the semantic perimeter of truth-faith-faithfulness-loyalty, is the key to entering into the secret of this psalm. The psalmist asks his God, the God of the Covenant and therefore the God of their mutual pact, to be greater than reciprocity. And the possibility of this paradoxical operation lies above all in the semantics of the beautiful word *emét*, which simultaneously means both: *truth and faithfulness*. That "remember you, remember yourself" so common in the psalms, returns once again. When sitting on the rubble of the past, in times of failure and misfortune, the first prayer is no longer that of ordinary times: «God remember me». In terrible times, the exercise of memory becomes radical and wonderful. Man makes use of the resource of last resort and dares to say to God: "remember yourself", remember who you are. And thus the most beautiful of prayers is born, the one we say to God, but also the one we say to each other when, sitting on the garbage heap of what remains of our covenants and pacts, we still find the strength for one last request: "remember who you were, remember who you are". Being *faithful* to a pact therefore has its root and reason in *truth*. A similar expression that we read in other psalms is: "for the sake of your name". As if to say: "You YHWH are not like us, who are tied and imprisoned within the law of reciprocity and conditionality of our covenants. You are greater because you are able to continue to be faithful to a covenant even when we betray it; you are a true God because you are also free from reciprocity. This is why you must be faithful to your name, you must be loyal to your own 'forever' precisely and because we no longer are. Be greater than the freedom you have given us". This is how, by repeating these prayers, we too learned to pronounce our "forever". By reminding God of his "forever", we have become capable of saying it too. And so we learned forgiveness, we too learned a greater loyalty for the sake of "our name", for a mysterious true loyalty to ourselves that made us, at times, better than our reciprocity.

Over the centuries, this psalm has been prayed by many men and women who, faced with the rubble of adult life, have reminded God of the truth of the first covenant and of the first vocation; and while they reminded God they reminded themselves of it too, in a new experience of reciprocity - as adults the truth-fidelity to our "name" can only be resurrected if someone else reminds us of it. We know that in the beginning there was a true voice, a calling and an alliance. We responded generously, we believed

in that truer truth. And we started the journey, we got dusty along the way, and one day we found ourselves in exile in a foreign land, even when we had never left the house or the convent. We become adults within a vocation when we are able to understand that the life we are leading is not the one we wanted to lead, and a profound feeling of infidelity arises, an infidelity that is not betrayal but the revelation of the truth of that first voice. Sometimes, along these rivers, we too manage to cry out to God "remember yourself", in order to tell him: "I didn't manage to keep the fidelity of the first covenant, but you must be faithful. And if you are faithful to the pact with me I will not miss anything, it's a nice way to grow old and die". If faith is also a *rope (fides)*, then the climb continues and does not speed up until one of the two lets go.

The conclusion of the psalm, its last "remember" is very beautiful and mysterious indeed: «Remember, O Lord, how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations» (Psalm 89,50). How could we not discern an echo here of the song of Isaiah's servant?! «Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows» (Isaiah 53,4). The poet becomes down to his very tissue and bowels (*in sinu*) an image of the suffering, exiled, humiliated people. Guido Ceronetti's comment on this verse is very beautiful: "If there is a unifying principle that is not of theological invention, it is this *dishonor* that unites us. In this text, however, it is also Scripture itself that speaks, saying of itself, with implacable sacred shamelessness, what it has brought about *of* the world and *into* the world "(The Book of Psalms, p. 274).

All the wombs of the suffering servants in history were a place where a different seed was able to grow and mature, a seed which one day centered into the womb of a virgin. "Rejoice oh Mary" is the answer to the many "remember oh God".