

Goodness and the name of women

Prophecy is history/18 - Especially in times of crisis, mothers always know what is most important and valuable

By Luigino Bruni



Published in
the [Avvenire](#) 05/10/2019

"Please know, my dear, that the end of my life is near. So hurry and come to Santa Maria degli Angeli ... I ask you once again to bring me those sweets, which you used to give me when I was sick in Rome"

Letter from S. Francis to Friar Jacoba, Franciscan Sources 253-255

Elisha's miracles are great narratives of life and death, and reveal new passages from the grammar of

feminine talent and the duty of the prophets.

There is no greater gift on earth than a child. When a child dies, we experience the greatest possible sense of deception. And if we lived that gift as a gift from God, his death sends our faith into a deep crisis, we experience that deception as a deception from God. When our children die we die too, faith dies, God dies. Sometimes we are able to rise again, and with us faith rises too, God rises again. We love the image of the crucifix deeply because Golgotha is our daily bread, while the Mount Tabors of this world are few and far between.

After a new war between Israel and Moab (2 Kings, 3), Elisha returns as a prophet of the people, women and children: «The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead... But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves"» (2 Kings 4,1-2). In the ancient world, creditors also came to take the children of insolvent debtors to enslave them. This also happened in Israel, but the Jews wanted for insolvent debtors to be treated differently among the different people of YHWH: «They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you» (Leviticus 25, 39-40). And then in the Year of Jubilee the debt slaves were to be set free. «They are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then they and their children are to be released» (Leviticus 25, 40-41).

Elisha multiplies his jar of oil, and tells the woman: «Go, sell the oil and pay your debts» (2 Kings 4,7). According to the Law, slaves had to wait seven years before becoming free again; for the prophets, on the other hand, slaves had to be freed here and now. The prophets are liberators of slaves. For them, not even the Law of Moses is sufficient for a truly worthy life. The Law of Moses regarding debtors, a different and more humane law, would not have been born without the prophecy of Israel. But the prophecy is never satisfied with the laws, because no human law can measure up to the Promised Land. The only law that appeals to prophets is the one we have not yet written. The law of the Kingdom of Heaven is the law of the yet-to-be. «One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat» (2 Kings 4,8). This "illustrious" woman loved the prophet and "kept him" eating in her beautiful home. The woman said to her husband: «Let's

make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us» (2 Kings 4,9-10). This family not only feeds Elisha, but they even built a small apartment where he could "retire". The first Bethany of the Bible.

There are people who, thanks to a special and precious kind of calling, know how to grasp that need for fraternity and humanity typical of the prophets, and move to fulfil it. They might not do many other "pious" things during their existence, but the room that they always keep prepared, cleaned and perfumed for the passing prophet-friend is enough to give a good meaning to their life. You can be a good person by doing just *one single thing* well in life. These people understand that for the prophet no five-star hotel is better than the "upper floor" bedroom. Sometimes we lose too many of these "last-minute dinners" in the company of prophets because we are not able to fully comprehend the value of these small masonry rooms, the highly spiritual value in a table with food, a bed, a chair and a lamp in the top floor of a friend's home. There are people who have been walking for years without perishing because they had that one friend who could keep a room ready and set a dinner table for them if needed. At the end of his life Francis, lover of the poor and of lepers, desires the "mostaccioli" of Friar Jacoba, a Roman noblewoman who was a close friend of his. Not all the rich deserve the "troubles" of the Gospel. There are some that are part of the people of the Beatitudes. The Kingdom of Heaven would be much "poorer" without the presence of at least some rich men and women who used their wealth and possessions to "house" the prophets. Every hospitality is sacred, every welcomed guest brings a blessing. But the hospitality of the prophets transforms our home into a corner of paradise; he fills it with angels, manna, milk and honey - whoever has welcomed and welcomes prophets knows this all too well.

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"» (2 Kings 4,10-13). A sense of reciprocity awakens in Elisha, generated by the hospitality of the woman. But he makes a mistake with his first attempt at returning the favour with a counter-gift: «She replied, "I have a home among my own people"» (2 Kings 4,13). That woman did not need material goods, prestige or power. These are almost never the goods of women, especially when they are not in need and "live well". Elisha understands and asks Gehazi: «"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked. Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old"» (2 Kings 4,14-15). Life is the primary good of women. Elisha called the woman: «"About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms." "No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!"» (2 Kings 4,15-16).

We're back to the Oak of Mamre. The guest announces the greatest of news to the woman, a gift that she no longer expects because it can no longer be expected (her husband was old). Here the woman, like Sarah before her, does not immediately believe in the supernatural promise of that man. But she does not laugh, instead she says something terribly serious, because it concerns her intimacy and greatest secret: "Do not tease me". Women never mess around with life and children. But, even here, the impossible comes true: «The woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her» (2 Kings 4,17). «The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, "My head! My head!" His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother"» (2 Kings 4,18-19). The years go by. The child falls ill and the father sends him to his mother and to her most reliable hands - how often don't we see this, how many times don't we do it ourselves. But the child dies. His death gives us one of the most beautiful scenes in the Bible, which reveals another piece of biblical grammar about women's talents: «She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God» (2 Kings 4,21). The child is dead, but the mother refuses to believe it and senses that life in this case is closely linked to that guest prophet. Elisha is on Mount Carmel at that moment, but while she waits the mother lays the boy on the prophet's bed, the only place she knows in which to lay that child to rest. «She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return". "Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "That's all right," she said» (2 Kings 4,22-23).

The husband does not understand. He thinks that the prophet is a man of worship, to whom you turn only during feasts and holidays. The woman, on the other hand, knows that there is one single chance to save her son, and his name is Elisha. That phrase of hers: "Well, that's all right" (or: "Oh well, bye") is just beautiful, and marks another big difference between the woman and her husband and how they manage the crisis they're facing. The man appears stuck, confused, resigned. The wife acts swiftly, in a hurry, knowing full well what she must do. She immediately leaves and orders the servant: «Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you». Elisha sees her from afar and asks his servant Gehazi to ride out to meet her and ask her: «Are you all right?» to which she replies «Everything is all right!» (4,24-26). She wasn't well at all of course, but she doesn't want to waste time talking to an ambassador. Only women know the times and rhythm of life in the midst of a great crisis, in which the only thing that matters is reaching and obtaining your goal immediately. They are veritable masters of the relative value of both things and words: they can spend hours in dialogue merely for the sake of conversation, but when life is at stake they become capable of perfect and ruthless cost-benefit calculations. She just wants to save her son here, so she only wants to speak to Elisha, right away. She doesn't lose herself in chatter and pleasantries, there's no time for small talk with butlers. Instead she throws herself at Elisha's feet and utters a stupendous phrase that only a woman could say: «Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn't I tell you, "Don't raise my hopes"?» (2 Kings 4,28).

It is the dramatic centre of the story. The woman reproaches Elisha for having raised her hopes up and deceived her, for having deceived her with a child given and then taken back, for having ridiculed her. Women possess an authority of life capable of generating words of a unique and infinite force. I have heard women shouting reproaches to men and to God alike of an unprecedented harshness, but the certainty of witnessing and experiencing something extraordinary among those present, observing, was even stronger. In those moments, an insult or a curse can even have the sweet scent of a psalm. The scream of the Shunammite woman constitutes one of the truest and most beautiful prayers in the whole Bible, and remains beautiful and very true even without knowing (because at this point we still do not know) if the child is resurrected or not. Elisha sends his servant to the boy. But the mother understands that a possible salvation lies within the person of the prophet. Again, she protests and tells Elisha: «"As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you". So he got up and followed her» (2 Kings 4,30). Elisha continues his discipleship. And here he becomes a follower of his own disciple - a discipleship has ripened into maturity when it knows how to alternate the following of the teacher with the following of the disciple. Elisha entered the house and found the boy lying dead on the bed, he began to pray «mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm... The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes» (2 Kings 4,34-36). And then he said to the mother: «Take your son!» (2 Kings 4,37). The woman receives the gift of that child for the second time. The happy ending of the story, however, is not the resurrection of the child, which brings truth to the woman's cry of protest, but it is the truth in that scream that makes the end of this story and of our stories true, when our children remain dead and our screams stay true. That Shunammite woman stays nameless in the Bible. Perhaps so that every mother, who finds herself suspended between certain death and a hope for resurrection, can add her own name in its place.