
BUT EVERY CALL IS A TEST

THE VALUE OF THE WORD BETWEEN RADICAL FREEDOM AND RADICAL NEEDINESS

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"Are there no more prophets? We can't say that; the important thing is to distinguish false prophets from the true ones, and this applies to all eras. Perhaps the fundamental element to distinguish them is this: the false prophet feels like a prophet and the true prophet doesn't feel like a prophet".

Paolo De Benedetti, *Elijah* (rough translation)

Anyone who finds themselves writing to respond to an inner call will have experienced, at least once in their life, that those words they are writing were first received and "eaten". Written words that are not *vanitas* are born of flesh and blood - and thus manage to reach the flesh and blood of those who read them, and leave their mark in them. When, every now and then, we feel that a different word touches us, teaches us and changes us (and if it has never happened to us we haven't really begun to read yet), that word has already touched and marked the body of the person who wrote it, because it had come out of a wound. Prophecy is an event of the word, of words and the body. Because between the word received and the word uttered and written there is the body of the prophet. The whole of his body is the instrument with which the prophet plays his melodies of heaven and earth. All prophets, especially Ezekiel.

After seeing and listening to the first words, the first prophetic command that Ezekiel receives concerns his own body: "«...open your mouth and eat what I give you.« And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezekiel 2:8-10). And then the gesture is specified: "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it" (3:3). The scroll enters the bowels, is digested, becomes part of the body of the prophet. The word that he will have to announce penetrates him up to the marrow. In Isaiah, on the day of his vocation, God touches his mouth with a burning coal (Is 6:6). Ezekiel eats a papyrus roll, that is, a written word, because he is a writer prophet. It is in fact likely that Ezekiel personally wrote a good part of his book, so in his vocation there is a special relationship with the word heard, assimilated and then written.

This unfolded scroll that becomes food is very powerful and evocative. This episode has not only profoundly inspired Christian spiritual tradition (cf.: *ruminatio*), but it also reveals to us how profound the link between the word and the flesh is. Ezekiel is also there within the possibility of thinking and writing that infinite phrase that was read at the end of each mass for centuries: The *logos became flesh*. The prophetic word is the embodied word that therefore undergoes and shares all the vicissitudes and dimensions of the body. It falls ill and suffers, it is very strong and very fragile, but unlike our body the prophetic word *can only survive* if it becomes a word collected and guarded by a faithful and living community. The Bible is also a sacrament of the immortality of the words of the prophets - every word written with the flesh contains a desire for immortality.

At the same time, even if the received word is mixed within the flesh of the prophet, he is not the *master* of the word he says. The prophet remains a poor beggar who is hungry for the word. Prophesying is not a profession, it is not learned through the accumulation of experience, and the passing of time only makes us more aware of this typical neediness and fragility. Perhaps this is one of the meanings of the mysterious experience we find at the beginning of Ezekiel's mission: "But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, »Go, shut yourself within your house. And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth... But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God' «" (3:24-27). He has just received the call to prophesy, and behold, Ezekiel finds himself dumb and stuck within his house, at the mercy of bodily hindrances that will return periodically in his life. Ezekiel immediately experiences the lack of control of the word he receives and must announce. It is part of his flesh, yet it has its own radical freedom. In this the prophets are similar to fathers and mothers. Children are flesh and blood, but they are not our property. They come and go; in the meantime we remain chained in the house, beggars of returns and liberations. This is also why Mary of Nazareth, the mother who gives her flesh to the Logos, is the ultimate expression and icon of biblical prophecy.

It is the radical shortage of the word that distinguishes prophets from false prophets, who do not experience muteness and chains because they sell only self-produced words in the markets. The non-false prophet recognizes a different word because it comes to him in his muteness, it frees him from the chains of his own chatter and that of others ("But when I speak with you..."). The alternation of silence and words is the rhythm of the prophetic vocation. To understand the relationship that a true prophet has with the word that is not his but that he must transmit, we must not think of the masters of rhetoric, or brilliant speakers, but rather of the stammering, those who struggle with their bodies to be able to emit some understandable words at all costs. The strength of non-false prophecy is proportional to the fatigue of giving birth to words despite the body's tenacious resistance.

This aphasia and domestic imprisonment then reveal to us some essential elements of the grammar of spiritual life, at least of the biblical one. Ezekiel is called to perform a task that has to do constitutively with the use of the word and with public places. After a few days he finds himself dumb and under house arrest, by

the work of the same "spirit" that revealed his task to him. It's a paradox, but not for the Bible. Moses meets YHWH on the Horeb, who assigns him from the burning bush the task of liberating his people. He sets out on a journey to Egypt, but "on the way the Lord met him and sought to put him to death" (Ex 4:24). A long time after this, another "prophet", who had received the "task" of announcing and bringing about another Kingdom, found himself on a cross crying out for his abandonment. Whoever is looking for a linear god, who upon assigning a task stipulates a complete contract with us with an attached job description must go and try to find him outside of the Bible (and life). The biblical God is different, because life is different, because *man is different*.

In fact, it is not uncommon that in authentic vocations, the luminous day of the call is followed by the experience of the *impossibility* of realizing it, which is an equally fundamental and essential experience. We set out on the journey because we are called to carry out a task, and once we do so we find ourselves prevented in our soul and/or body from doing exactly what we had to do. One clearly feels a scientific, artistic, professional, religious or married vocation, but the "day after" the call that same first voice tells us or makes us do the opposite. Sometimes this second experience comes very early: the week after entering novitiate, or during our honeymoon. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, a new word arrives and we set out again, to be stopped by another muteness and other ties that are the same and all different. Until the end, when another mute phase will stop us, and even there and then we will be waiting for another new word.

These are very human and frequent experiences, inside and outside religions. The Bible tells us that these were also the experiences of the prophets, of the men who had a most intimate relationship with God; and while it tells us so it sends us a message of great hope and closeness. We read them and we feel seen and understood and therefore included in the same history of salvation. The first *neighbour* of the Bible is not the good Samaritan, but the Bible itself. There are people who have begun an authentic spiritual journey because one day, in great despair, they read or listened to an episode narrated in the Bible. They recognized it as something familiar and intimate, they felt being inside it, they felt that their pain had already been experienced and loved, and there they began to rise again.

Finally, in these first chapters on the vocation of Ezekiel, we also find the great and wonderful image of the *watchman*: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me" (3:17). Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea, Ezekiel is also called to be a watchman. Isaiah (ch. 21), the great biblical reference for the prophetic image of the watchman, had used the Hebrew word *shomer*: The watchman as *custodian*. *Shomer* is also used by Cain when not answering God's question ("where is your brother?") he declared himself not a custodian of Abel, his brother. He had killed him *because* he had not been a custodian (Gen 4). Mutual guardianship is a name for brotherhood.

The prophet is the anti-Cain, he is the one who safeguards Abel, the one who expands the territory of brotherhood to make it coincide with the entire city, and looks beyond it from the watchtower, towards the horizon of a fraternal land of all. He is in his guard post, suspended between heaven and earth, the solitary inhabitant of the walls. He is not there to sight enemies, but to intercept a

different speaking voice, and then transmit it at any cost. The prophets have never stopped guarding our cities. They are there, they have learned to *stay*, to accompany us on the Holy Saturdays of history. And every now and then, on the quietest days, someone still manages to hear their cry.