

Blessed is the bread of the poor

Prophecy is history / 11 - In the logic of the God of the prophets what is given is received and multiplied

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«Breaking bread, listening to a Mozart quartet, walking and laughing in the rain, at this moment there are beings who are not allowed to do such simple things - because they are sick, because they are in prison, or because they are so poor that that to them a piece of bread is worth a fortune.»

Christian Bobin *Mozart and the rain*

With the beginning of the cycle of Elijah we enter into some of the most well-known and

beloved episodes in the Bible, which so inspired the Gospels. We also have confirmation of the need to "step outside": when faith is threatened from the outside, it is within that *outside* or exterior or that salvation must begin.

There is a deep kinship and friendship between the poor and the prophets. There are few displays that are more beautiful on earth, than the poor who share their table with a prophet or guest who passes by and blesses them. The bread of the poor is the first nourishment of the prophets, who if they stop eating this bread risk beginning to lose their prophecy and soul.

We are about to meet Elia. We prepare ourselves for important meetings. People gather, stay in silence, because desire and expectation already constitute meeting. The Bible is not fiction, its characters are not actors. They are living people of flesh and blood, who live and rise again every time someone treats like living and real people. In the Bible, this life, that we also perceive in great literature and in art, acquires a strength and a beauty that are perhaps unique - the Word one day became flesh because the biblical word, different but real, already was, and still is.

Elijah is the patriarch of the biblical prophets. An exceptional figure, caught between history and legend, extraordinary in its lights and its shadows. He did not leave us with a book, he did not speak a lot, the Books of Kings dedicate only a few chapters to him; yet the figure of Elijah, together with Moses and David, is present and loved in the biblical tradition, in many Christian Churches, as well as in Islam. He is a prophet who inspired history of art, music, literature – you only need to mention

only the name of Captain Ahab in Moby Dick. Beloved by the poor, by monastic traditions, by mystics and by lovers of prayer alike. There is no name more present than that of Elijah in the Gospels, and we would have a different Jesus without Elijah. In the celebration of Passover, families make room for an extra dish and an empty chair: they are for Elijah, because he could always arrive - he always does. This is him: «Elijah, the Tishbite, one of those who had settled in Gilead, said to Ahab:" For the life of YHWH, in whose presence I am, in these years there will be neither dew nor rain, except when I will command"» (1 Kings 17.1).

Elijah breaks into the scene without presentation. Like Abraham, like Noah. His name says many things: "YHWH is my God". He came from the region of Gilead, in Transjordan, hence from the Kingdom of the North. He is sent to King Ahab, a great idolater: "Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord... It was not enough for him to commit the sin of Jeroboam, but he also took Jezebel of Sidon as wife, and began to serve Baal and to prostrate himself before him ... provoking YHWH, more than all the kings of Israel before him "(1 Kings 16.30-33).

Elijah announces the arrival of an exceptional drought to Ahab, which will end when he says so. He carries a nefarious message from YHWH to Ahab, and presents himself as a future *cure* for the evil he announces. Then he begins his journey: «Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward» (1 Kings 17, 2-3). Like Abraham, the story of Elijah begins with a "leave, go away". He is a wandering and fugitive man. And like Abraham, Cain and Jacob, he too goes to the east. However, east for biblical man is also the direction of the Exile, it is the way to Babylon. Prophecy is exile, and nothing says exile more than a prophet – away from family affections, from friends, from oneself: the prophet is an eternal *lost man*, because no country is really his country, because he never returns home.

Elijah flees because, as we will see, Ahab and his wife Jezebel persecute him. The true prophets are always fugitives and in constant danger, even when they spend all their lives in the same place. They follow and obey a voice, and therefore often come into conflict with the voice of the powerful. They speak when the voice asks for it and not when it is appropriate to speak. And they speak their words freely and for this they are hated by those who would like to command the words of all, the more hated they are the more the words are controlled - the prophet becomes hated more than ever when his word remains the only free word in the city.

«So he did what the Lord had told him. He went» (1 Kings 17.5). Here we have another essential element of the genome of non-false prophets. Elijah obeys, departs, leaves. There are no prophets without this radical obedience: «So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook» (1 Kings 17,5-6). One of the most famous scenes in the Bible and most beloved and represented in art. A splendid image of the providence that accompanies the men and women of God, who accompanies and walks with everyone. Whoever obeys and leaves does not die, because that obedience generates a mysterious and very real fraternity with nature and with the poor - how many crows and how many streams continue to feed our prophets, left hungry and thirsty because of the wickedness and pettiness of men? I want to see Elijah fed by heaven again today, in the shape of the many prophets who now live in prisons, forgotten by everyone – but not by God and his birds.

This beginning of the wandering life of Elijah immersed in a picture of cosmic brotherhood is very beautiful. The great spiritual traditions have always sensed that there is a law of agape written in the universe, more profound and true than human intentions. Getting thirsty near a source and drinking its water is an authentic experience of mutual love with the earth, and here we can use the word love / agape without giving in, in any way, to romanticism. It is a metaphor, but an embodied metaphor. The love present in the cosmos is greater than the sum of the loves of men and women; human fraternity alone is too small despite being immense. Not all love is voluntary. There is also love in the meekness of the lamb and in the humility of the cow. We may not see it, but it is there, and it is by

living and staying in this surplus between human love and the love of the world that we can *truly* call the stream and the ravens our brothers and sisters, and together with Francis preach to the birds.

But, as announced to Ahab, "Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land." (1 Kings 17,7). And Elijah starts again: «Then the word of the Lord came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food» (1 Kings 17, 8-9). It is the poor who feed the prophets. After the ravens and the stream, here is a widow, a Phoenician foreign woman, worshiper of that god Baal whom Jezebel had imported from the Phoenicians, who adds her voice to the chorus of the provident fraternity of the earth.

Ahab's wife had brought Baal from Sidon; Elijah brings YHWH to another woman from Sidon. This is how the prophets act. They move in counter-time, in an obstinate and contrary direction and while the foreign gods occupy their land, they go to announce their God in the cradle of paganism. Because they know that if their God is true - and they know he is because they know him by name - then he must be able to speak to pagans and be understood by them too. And so the text begins the cycle of Elijah with the encounter between the prophet of YHWH and a Phoenician woman, giving us an eternal icon of "faith stepping outside", telling us that when faith is threatened from the outside it is inside that "outside" that salvation must begin.

«When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it - and die."» (1 Kings 17,10-12). This is the desperate condition of the widow tasked with feeding the prophet by order of YHWH. That "we will eat it and then die" brings to the mind of the attentive reader the scene of Hagar and her son Ishmael in the desert ("all the water in the skin was gone" Genesis 21.15). In that story, it was the angel, the first angel of the Bible, who saved the woman and the child. Here, it is a prophet saving the woman and her son - what if the angels were prophets walking among us, who, like the angels, we cannot see?

«Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land." She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry» (1 Kings 17,13-16). Women, especially mothers and poor women, recognize the prophets. They have an extra sense; they intercept sounds and voices that very often escapes us men. That poor woman, in her desperation, understood that that guest brought a blessing. She knew who was asking her "please give me something to drink". She welcomed the prophet as a prophet and received the reward of the prophet.

Elijah is a prophet loved by people because he is a prophet of water and bread. In the town where I was born, on the day of our patron saint's feast (Saint Stephen) the parish priest still gives a small sandwich or piece of bread to each member of the congregation. A very ancient tradition that speaks the value of bread in a world of the poor - no *price* could quite cover its *value*. Bread is the first gift for the poor. The episode of the widow of Zarephath also tells us another thing: bread is also the first gift *by* the poor. Just as, eight centuries later, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves was possible because a poor man did his part, giving away everything he had. Only the poor know about a hundredfold, and only those who give away everything. It is the all-of-little that manages to become "a hundred times more". Little of much does not multiply, at the very most it adds up. Providence comes only to the empty jar and the flourless cupboard - not even a minute before, because it requires the infinite space of nothingness to take place.

The prophets give us many things, but first, if we are poor, they must give us water, flour, oil. And we will recognize them by breaking bread with them.