

And prayer took bodily form and became flesh

Prophecy is history/ 12 - Too many "deceased" do not rise because we delude ourselves that words are enough

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Published in the [Avvenire](#) 25/08/2019

« We seek another God, who is not proud of this unhappy world. We need to change God to keep him, and for him to keep us.»

Paolo de Benedetti *Which God?*

The miracle of Elijah who brings a boy back to life reminds us of the great meaning of the word that becomes flesh in the Bible, in life and in prayer.

Prophets are formed in the *borderline* between life and death. That is where they learn their "job". They are perpetually poised,

tightrope walkers between the already was and has not yet been, exposed on the fundamental and decisive boundary of the human condition. The Bible knows that those who see God die. The prophet "sees" God, has seen him or at least heard him on the day of his calling. The prophetic vocation is Tabor, Golgotha and the empty tomb all at the same time: we see God, we die, we rise again. The second episode of Elijah's mission is the resurrection of a boy. Still suspended between life and death: «Later it happened that the son of the landlady fell ill. His illness worsened so much that he died» (1 Kings 17,17). Last time, we had left Elijah with the miracle of the multiplication of bread and oil, which saved the widow and her son from starvation. Now that widow's child (or maybe another widow's: we do not know if the two stories were originally separated or not) becomes ill and dies. A scene that we will find time and time again in the New Testament as well, and which would have been very different without Elijah.

The mother is the first person to speak: «Then she said to Elijah: "What is there between you and me, man of God? Did you come to me to renew the memory of my guilt and to kill my son?"» (1 Kings 17,18). It was very common in ancient times that the presence of a religious man - a priest or prophet - during dramatic events and misfortunes was interpreted as a sign of condemnation and guilt. Especially when the religious person was a male and the person at the center of the misfortune was a poor man or a woman, the signs of the sacred often became dark and threatening. Even today, the presence of religion during moments of great sorrow is not immediately a sacrament that reduces pain and brings consolation. As is the case with the woman in this story, the first reaction can often be anger, fear and the activation of feelings of guilt that are always the first to appear with our misfortunes. How many times have we not witnessed the dramatic reactions of relatives towards the priest who arrives in a house silenced by the demons of mourning? That priest can become the image of a cruel God who has ripped a son or a brother away. An invisible but very real curtain of

embarrassment can arise around that religious man; sometimes screams, curses, cursing and imprecations. It is part of the learning and maturation process of priests and nuns to know how to receive those curses and be able to read them as a high form of prayer.

In that archaic world, the presence of Elijah causes the mother to read the misfortune as an irruption of God in her life, as result of her guilt. We do not know what her fault was, perhaps simply the human condition that people in ancient times read as inherently marked by a radical culpability. Despite all the biblical revelations and then Christianity telling us that God is *agape*, we too still continue to see our misfortunes as guilt - "if I gone with him", "if I had told him no", "this is my punishment for living a bad life"... Guilt is the first coin with which we pay our funeral bills. It comes alone and is inscribed in our cultural chromosomes. Economic-retributive religion is in fact much older and therefore rooted in the individual and collective heart of the religion of love and grace. That is why we need the prophets. The prophets stand next to us. They stay silent, they do not give us sermons or comforting speeches, they give us a God free from faults and merits, all grace and mercy. They do it with their words, but above all with their body: with a long and tenacious embrace, sharing a meal of tears and salt, standing close to us, silent, in those holy Saturdays that never end. It took me a lifetime - a priest friend told me - to understand that people who experience great pain do not seek words, they look for a body that knows how to live the *Stabat*.

«Elijah said to her, "Give me your son"» (1 Kings 17,19). Faced with the greatest pain known on earth, and which she can only barely sustain, Elijah takes the son's body in his arms. He does not preach: he acts and embraces. This is the only "word" that we would like to hear from the man of God who enters the son's room. «He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed» (1 Kings 17,19). That mom kept her son, the dead "boy" (yeled), close to her chest. A wonderful scene of an infinite humanity. If men and laws did not prevent them, mothers would continue to hold their dead children tightly to their chest forever, waiting for a God or a prophet to come along and raise them. If anyone has ever been able to write immense words about God's love for us, it is because he has seen and learned from the *agape* in mothers who continued holding their babies close to them, who never stopped doing it - women love the icon of Mary with the child because that little Jesus is also the image of their children, of those alive and even more so of those who died.

Only at this point does Elijah begin to pray: «Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die? "» (1 Kings 17,20). This is the different prayer of prophets, where the following words stand out: "Do you want to hurt this widow too?" This prayer begins with a protest, with a reproach to God who has *also* (hence *not only*) harmed his host. The biblical God does good, but also evil. Elijah puts himself on the side of the widow and the boy, and asks God to change, asking him to "convert". He does not console the woman by inviting her to accept "the will of God" or her destiny. We do these things because we do not know how to do anything else, but the prophet does not: he sympathizes with the mother and protests to God, *asking him to change*. He considers God responsible for the death of her son, because otherwise it would simply be a fetish. And, like Job, Elijah does not resort to economic and meritocratic theology to save God's justice. He does not think that men alone are responsible for their misfortunes - all deaths of youngsters are unjust deaths because they are the death of innocents. Elijah asks God to "wake up", to remember his name, which is different from that of idols, because he does not want the death of our children. The prophets, absurdly, prefer to be excommunicated by God than to sacrifice a boy. Abraham obeys God and leads his son to Mount Moriah. The prophet instead protests, argues with God, and does not bring his son to the altar - if we wanted a prophet in that terrible scene, we could find him in the ram.

In times of great crisis and unsustainable sorrow and pain, the prophet places himself next to us and asks God to prove himself to be *at least as good as a mother*. While he teaches us the words of God, he looks at the best very best side of man and points it out, *teaches it*, to God. If the Bible in the end has been able to give us the image of a God who is moved by the returned son, who leans over the victim on the road to Jericho, it is because the prophets dared to ask God to come down

from the heavens and become at least *as good as the mothers*. False prophets condemn men in order to defend God. True prophets know instead that the only way to truly save and protect God is to truly protect and save people - especially children. The prophets are God's friends. They have a unique intimacy with the absolute. This is their mystery. This episode tells us that the first task of the prophets is to use that divine intimacy to save our children.

«Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!"» (1 Kings 17,21). Elijah's use of his body to try to "resurrect" the boy is very suggestive. He lays himself three times over the boy to the full extension of his body, as if to give him life by contact, by osmosis. The prophets heal and resurrect with all their body. Their words are different and performative because, above all, they are embodied words, *words made of flesh*. Too many "dead" do not rise again because we are not able to use the whole body, deceiving ourselves that words are enough (the great illusion of those who write and perhaps comment on the prophets is to think that men can be saved only by writing words). The beginning of the story of Elijah tells us that miracles can only happen after putting our whole body on the body of who was, or seemed, dead. Too many deceased remain dead or truly die because we are afraid to "lay down on them", that is to touch them, to embrace them - in that culture, the dead could not be touched, they were impure: but not to the prophets. Saint Francis gave us splendid words, but the word that raised Assisi and the world was his kiss to the tormented body of the leper.

The words of prayer must come *together* with the word of the body. In certain representations of the via Crucis, we can see "angels rising and falling on the son of man", but until we see the body of a man we are not able to recognize God: «The woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth"» (1 Kings 17,24). God in order to save us did not become an angel, he became *man*: flesh and body. Here lies the great value of the body in biblical humanism. When prayer becomes a body, we can even overcome the angels. Elijah is the prophet of powerful prayer because he prays with his whole body. It is touching to see him while he prays on that boy's body. Because in him and with him we see other prophets who today continue to raise children, women and men - in wars, in camps, in the open seas - using their bodies as their first prayer: sharing the same misery, the same diseases, the same resurrections, death itself. Young boys and girls continue to die. Their mothers and fathers continue to despair and sometimes they curse God and his prophets. Elijah's gesture continues to remind us that if we one day want to save a child from the death of the body or the soul, we can only do so by reaching out, stretching ourselves out with our whole body. Three times, not one less.