

## The deception of false gratuitousness

### The exile and promise/8 - One does not only "betray" for personal gain, but also due to love without truth

By Luigino Bruni

Published in Avvenire 30/12/2018



«Words are essential and effective only when they are born out of silence. Silence opens the inner source from which words spring forth»

Romano Guardini, *The testament of Jesus*

The struggle between prophecy and false prophecy is a constant in human history. We find it at the centre of politics, economics, religions and organizations. In any given community there are people who are recognized as having a "vision" because they are the bearers of a certain charisma, of an ability to see differently and further,

to trace present and future scenarios, to indicate ways of salvation, well-being, human growth and ethics. But all "prophets" are not the same. The future and fortunes of a social reality depend heavily on the ability to identify and follow honest and true voices, while being wary of false ones. The Bible has identified some indicators of true and false prophecy. It has refined them over time, tested them, and then kept them for us so that we could use them in our own discernments.

A first note. False prophets present themselves with the same distinctive features as true prophets. Both, in general, belong to prophetic communities, exercise the same profession, and have received the same mandate from the people and, often, a prophetic calling as well. The true prophet finds himself on the same stage as the fake ones, he speaks in front of the same people - who end up preferring the latter group. This is why Ezekiel calls those we would call *false prophets* "prophets" (*nabi*) as well. «The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying» (Ezekiel 13,1-2). He recognizes them as colleagues, but denounces them as misguided prophets. Why? Where do these false prophets go wrong?

The false prophets of whom Ezekiel speaks are not charlatans infiltrated in the community (even if in those confused and terrible times there would have been those too), because if this were the case he would not call them "prophets". Here the false prophets are prophets who have lost their *soul* while still preserving their prophetic *technique* and craft. And as is always the case when dealing with the soul, it can disappear while we continue to live the same life and practice the profession as always. We have been saying the same Mass for years, but one day that unique breath that gives meaning to our gestures and words fades away; we attend the same lessons, but the spirit that filled the classroom and animated it is no longer there. The soul is *breath* (*anemos*), it is spirit. When breath dies, life ends, the prophet fades away and becomes something else, someone else. In the Bible and in our lives, true prophets are needed to notice and denounce other prophets who have lost their souls and are deviating from the right path. As long as there is a true prophet with the strength to denounce the false ones, we will always have hope to be able to save ourselves from the merchants of *vanitas*.

In this chapter, Ezekiel addresses the prophets who have failed and ruined themselves for personal “gain” or for the “interests” of a group directly. He tells the prophetesses, who are also active in Israel: «You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread» (Ezekiel 13,19). The prophets are particularly hard on “the acting-for-profit prophets”, because they know that the essence of an authentic prophetic calling is gratuitousness. It is therefore an easy game for them to identify false prophecy in the absence of gratuitousness, an infallible indicator. Being absolute experts in the art of gratuitousness, because they speak and remain silent outside of any utilitarian calculation, it is enough for them to see some form of profit appear - economic, status, power ... - to issue their certain and unquestionable sentence of false prophecy. But economic interest is neither the first nor the most important reason for a prophet’s betrayal - economic corruption is almost always the consequence of a deeper corruption, that of the heart. Ezekiel clearly tells us what false prophecy depends on: «Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!» (Ezekiel 13,3). A prophet loses his soul because he begins to prophesy while “following his own spirit”, therefore *no longer following* the other spirit, that first spoke to him and whose words he or she related.

If a false prophet today was once an authentic prophet yesterday, because he had the experience of a voice speaking and calling to him, the forms of his degeneration will all be variations of the same main theme: the *silence* of the prophetic voice. The prophet enters a phase of the voice going silent, a common phase in this type of calling (see Jeremiah). Because an authentic prophet is not the master of the voice, it does not answer him on command, he does not know if and when it will speak to him again, or much less what it will tell him. It alternates between words and silence, or a few words and long periods of silence. And so he speaks only when a command within him tells him to do it, he speaks when he can no longer keep quiet. He is a docile obedient to a voice that is not his own. He must resist, with much effort and pain, even when his community suffers and asks him for a salvation that he cannot yet announce because he hasn’t heard about it, because that word has not been “addressed” to him yet. Each time, he must start over from scratch. Past experience refines his technique, increases his general skills, but cannot help to ensure him that tomorrow the prophetic spirit will continue to speak to him again. Prophecy is not magic, it is not a divinatory technique. It is a gift and, like all true gifts, it is always accompanied by surprise. We must imagine true prophets as being profoundly surprised every time the voice speaks to them and offers them a few different words. They can imagine them, hope for them, pray to them, but they will always remain destitute of speech – it is also for this reason that the true prophet is and needs to be a poor person. Even if they have seen him come back a hundred times, every time a child goes away with “his share of the inheritance” they will continue to keep a lantern lit at night and gaze towards the horizon hoping that he will come back again; and if he returns they will throw their arms around his neck with the same emotional surprise of the first time they saw him.

Resisting during these breaks from the voice, which can sometimes last for years if not decades, is extremely painful. And so, in order to answer all the questions that urgently and with force rise towards him, within this silence of the spirit, a prophet can yield to the temptation to draw on his *own spirit* without waiting for new “visions”. The need to continue to do one’s job prevails, and so the silence of the spirit is filled with one’s own words. This is a well-known phenomenon to artists for example, who lose their soul when, in the absence of the breath of inspiration, they find themselves unable to resist the silence and sterility and begin to listen to other different spirits. There are prophets who have turned into false ones merely because they found it impossible to resist the loud cry from their communities in great need and crisis. They are very difficult to recognize, and therefore more dangerous, because, they are sometimes moved by something that looks eerily similar to gratuitousness. They do not change their spirit for profit or gain, but to favour a form of love-gratuitousness without truth. Just like false prophecy exists, there is also something called *false gratuitousness*, one that is not accompanied by the truth about oneself.

The main and perhaps the only moral and spiritual exercise of a prophet is to distinguish the spirits who speak to him. Everyone, but especially those who have received a calling, know that our hearts are inhabited by more than one voice. Among these there is a delicate one, different from all the others, the one that contains the *spirit* of vocation. There are people who have discovered that they have a calling the same day they understood that the voice that had been

speaking to them in their hearts since childhood was not the truest one. Then they listened more attentively, deeply, and found another voice that said different and truer things, and they began followed it instead. The tragic beauty of those who have received a calling lies in the custody of the dialogue with this necessary and uncontrollable voice - and perhaps at the end of day we will realize that all the voices we heard were mere harmonies of same single beautiful melody, which we did not write. However, once the prophet begins to put quotation marks ("thus says the Lord") to the words his own spirit suggests to him, he leaves the community of true prophets (Ezekiel 13,9). And this is a final, definitive way out, because the prophetic voice can no longer speak in an already occupied soul, because the different "visions" need all that interior space - and it is very rare that a spoiled prophet can learn how to listen to the different spirits again.

Hence, this decadence and decline take many forms. But Ezekiel clearly describes some of the more common traits: «Your prophets, Israel, are like jackals among ruins. You have not gone up to the breaches in the wall to repair it for the people of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord» (Ezekiel 13,4-5). Like foxes or jackals, false prophets take advantage of the rubble of their own city, transform the destroyed houses into dens and shelters, and wander about in the breaches looking for food. Honest prophets climb into the breaches and try to rebuild things; the false ones need the ruins for their business interests, and therefore they do not want to overcome the crisis because it is their main source of success and gain (those who deny the seriousness of a crisis when they are already in the middle of devastation are most certainly false prophets, in good or bad faith). The second image that Ezekiel uses is also very strong and effective: «Because they lead my people astray (...) when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash» (Ezekiel 13,10). The people have built a fragile wall made of bricks of false illusions and vain hopes; the false prophets plaster it with promises of salvation and miracles to give it an appearance of strength. Thus the only true salvation, that of the "remainder" that will come back, is denied, and the words of Ezekiel (and of Jeremiah) are dismissed as prophecies of misfortune, from enemies of the people and of God.

Finally, within this painful horizon (the greatest suffering of a prophet is to see his own people fall for the illusions of false prophets), Ezekiel gives us a great word of hope: «I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds» (Ezekiel 13,20). The prophet is a liberator. He unties our ropes of false illusions and false consolation so that may see truer and different ones appearing on the horizon. And then liberate us to take flight on a higher level.