

Greater than our destiny

The Exile and the promise 9 - The moral and spiritual responsibility of every action is always personal

By Luigino Bruni



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«As the instinct of evil seeks to seduce man to sin, so he tries to seduce him to become too righteous»

Martin Buber, *Hasidic stories and legends*

Our civil dialogue becomes rich and good when we are able to be "you" with great many people, who increase and become truer as the years go by. However, this universal law knows few decisive exceptions, where it is necessary for the "you" to

become one. Marriages, for example, the dimension of uniqueness is inscribed in their nature. Some very few but essential words of the "heart" can only be said to one's own bride, because if we tell them to more women we empty them of their beauty and truth. When the Bible tells us that the relationship with God is to be lived as a covenant and a pact, it is actually telling us something very similar: if in my heart I say the same words to more than one deity, I am not saying anything true to anyone. The biblical God knows only how to speak heart-to-heart, he knows only of a dialogue between two, with us. Hence, the fight against idolatry waged by the prophets is essentially an attempt to leave men and women the possibility to truly being able to be you with God, without deceiving or being deceived.

«Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?"» (Ezekiel 14,1 -3). The leaders of the community of the people of Israel exiled in Babylon go to Ezekiel and ask him to question YHWH. Here is his answer: «Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!» (Ezekiel 14,6). YHWH does not respond to their request and invites them to abandon the idols. A central theme of prophecy returns, idolatry, which is presented here as a question of "heart": the people and their leaders had hosted gods different from the one God in their souls, they had intimately corrupted themselves. This form of idolatry in exile is different from that which Ezekiel had observed when he went "in vision" in the temple of Jerusalem now populated by other deities placed next to YHWH. This in Babylon is not a public idolatry, also because the exiles did not have a temple. What little public religious life the deportees had they continued to celebrate YHWH as God. It was in *private* that corruption had arrived, in the homes where families introduced Babylonian amulets and statues that were prayed to and worshiped in secret. Therefore, while on the outside they continued to pray to the God of the Covenant, in their heart idols had been introduced, prayed to and worshiped like another "you". Ezekiel can only give one possible response: convert and return, "turn", radically change direction, our God is true and different because he does not speak, he *cannot speak* in an environment populated by your idols.

The prophet knows, he sees, even this intimate and secret corruption, and this is one of his most precious functions. He does not see it because he is a psychic or a magician, but because by vocation he has a different intelligence: he knows how to *look inside*. Perhaps he sees it in the eyes of his interlocutors, because the eyes are the mirror of the soul and therefore of every interior corruption. And as in every betrayal of the body and the heart, the eyes are the first to tarnish, to lose brightness. They no longer hold your gaze if not for a few seconds, that special light of childhood that can be found in good eyes for a lifetime, the one that preserves a different kind of purity that, if we preserve it, will be the first gift with which we will arrive in heaven, is no longer to be seen. His speech continues and lets us know another form of false-prophecy: «And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the Lord have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel. If a prophet deceives himself and makes a prophecy, I, the Lord, leave that prophet in the deception: I will stretch out my hand against him and erase him from mine Israelite people» (Ezekiel 14,9). Thus among the many false prophets in exile there were also those who continued to carry out their profession among the people corrupted in faith. Being sellers of *vanitas*, they had no real dialogue to safeguard and therefore offered prophecies to any applicant. They were so loved by the people, they satisfied their religious needs, but in reality they betrayed and deceived them, and they made (and still render) life even harder for the honest prophets.

This treaty on idolatry ends (for now), and with a narrative twist, we immediately find ourselves in front of a different horizon, in which Ezekiel reveals new and very important things. «The word of the LORD came to me: ¹³“Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its people and their animals, ¹⁴ even if these three men—Noah, Daniel^[a] and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD» (Ezekiel 14,12-14). Here the great theme is that of individual responsibility for each action and the transmission of faults (and merits) from parents to children («even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved, but the land would be desolate» Ezekiel 14,16). In order to strengthen and universalize his reasoning, Ezekiel names three legendary and non-Jewish figures, known for their great justice – Ezekiel’s cultural knowledge and intelligence impresses, embracing distant and ancient civilizations, in this he is even greater than the other biblical prophets. Noah, Job and Daniel were mythical Middle Eastern characters who the Bible later will resume and transform into spiritual and literary masterpieces. Ezekiel tells us that even these absolute ethical champions would not be able to save their children with their proverbial justice. Why?

The relationship between the faults and justice of fathers or parents and those of children is a theme that, in forms that are not entirely consistent among each other, appears regularly through the Bible. Life is a rope (*fides*) that winds itself from generation to generation, and is influenced and marked by each one it passes. Beyond any religious or scientific theory, it is a fact of life that the faults and merits of fathers and mothers are transmitted to their children. Their virtue, their intelligence, their economy and their culture, their ethical choices, their mistakes and their sins condition our lives, for better or for worse, sometimes thoroughly. However, we, as well as Ezekiel, also know that we are greater than the destiny inscribed in our genes and in our past. One of the characteristics that make Adam "only a little inferior to the angels" (Psalm 8) is our ability to become different from how we should have become considering the family from which we come, and the blessings and wounds of our childhood and youth. We are much more than mere chance and necessity, even if this "much more" also hides the possibility of worsening our destiny (a life that changes for the worse is always morally preferable to a life determined by our past, because the value of freedom is infinite).

Ezekiel and we know that there are virtues and faults that are not transmitted through the family line, and in many cases, it is for the best. We know it, but it hasn’t always been this way, and it wasn’t the case in Israel in Ezekiel’s time (who, not surprisingly, will return to this subject in Chapter 18). Civilization, in fact, has long attempted to deduce the virtues and above all the faults of the fathers from the actions of their children - "what family did this young man have to do this?!" Hence, for millennia individual responsibilities became collective, private stigma has become family related and public influencing the destiny of many innocents, fathers and children.

In this chapter of his book, Ezekiel is hence telling us something new and extremely significant: the moral and spiritual *responsibility* of our actions is *personal*. A theological and anthropological thesis, which together have enormous, splendid and terrible consequences. A bad son cannot be redeemed by a good father, who can stay and generally remains good even if his son has become unjust or bad. This is a moral law that derives from the seriousness and truth of history and from our dignity and freedom. There are merits and good virtues of our children that we cannot and must not ascribe to our chromosomes and to our inheritance, as there are degenerations and sins in them that we must not live as our responsibility and guilt. We see them growing, changing and sometimes getting worse than they could and should have become. We do everything to redeem them and to save them, but one day we reach a threshold that we cannot overcome, that we cannot cross.

It is the threshold that delimits and preserves their personal responsibility. As it protects them from our inherited wrongs, it also frees them from destiny possibly making them better than us, while also defending them from our holy desire to save them from the abyss that we already see opening up under their feet. Their necessary freedom that saves them from our sins is the same freedom that does not allow them to cling to our virtues. This is one of the great mysteries of parenthood, perhaps the greatest one: the joy we feel when we see our boys and girls becoming more beautiful and good than us is true because our pain is equally true when we are powerless to witness their failure. The spiritual maturity of adult life depends very much on learning the art of helplessly witnessing the Calvary of our children without despairing or giving into guilt. Sometimes we manage to detach them from the wood or nail ourselves to it in their place. We do it many times over. We cannot *always* do it however, because in this *impotence* of ours we are also generating in them the possibility of becoming fathers and mothers of sons and daughters who, perhaps, will become better than them, better than us.

Dedicated to Marco, who has returned to Casa del Padre, and knew how to preserve the purity in good eyes.