

But we can go back to being sincere

The soul and the harp/ 10 - Man and woman have something that God does not have: words without truth

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"Tyr lost his right hand during an oath, a false one given to a wolf to persuade him to allow himself to be tied up. In Rome, the mutilation of Scaevola is explained in relation to the mutilation of Tyr"

D. Briquei, On the good use of European comparativism in the Roman religion

Sincerity is a typical trait of the human repertoire, which grows together with the pain of lies and falsehoods. Today more than ever, we need the true strength of a new sincerity.

Man is the only being capable of lying. Neither animals nor God can lie, except for the small lies spoken (perhaps) by some monkeys. The sincerity of a dog attracts and seduces us because we know that it is not like ours. Because we know that, the effects of our words and gestures depend radically on something typically human: truth. The possibility of words without truth is something so human that not even God possesses this ability. This is one of the paradoxes of biblical humanism (and in general of many religions): lies are something that belongs to man and not to God. A "less than" that becomes a sort of "more than". Man, inferior to the Elohim in every aspect, can actually become "superior" and supersede him in the lowest of things - lies, malice, evil. God cannot lie, man and woman can. Here too lies the seductive power of sin: we do not sin only "to be immortal like Elohim", as the snake said to the woman; we also sin because we are attracted and deluded by the possibility of being more than God, by doing something that He cannot, because if he did, God would become just like us. Hence, this bizarre anthropological primacy also contains a dimension of beauty: the possibility of lying gives human sincerity the highest kind of dignity. He made us "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8), and in sincerity he paradoxically made us "more than Himself".

All civilizations have always been utterly afraid of lies. They know the destructive power they have in communities, families, and in society as a whole. They fear them as the greatest evil, as powerful and great as the word. The Bible, which lives on words, of divine words revealed in human words, of a God who speaks with our own words, is particularly vulnerable and exposed to false and lying words. So much so that the spiritually and ethically highest moments of the New and Old Testaments are events created by true words (the Covenant, the prophets, the Incarnation) but also by false ones (Cain, Jacob, Peter). The Bible is terrified of lies, because it strikes straight into the heart of its mystery. Its life is all about words; hence, it can be damaged and hurt when those words lose their truth. The word is the protagonist of Psalm 15: «Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart» (Psalm 15,1-2).

Who speaks the truth from their heart. The heart can contain a truth without the need to convert it into words. Sincerity lies in matching the content of our words with that of our heart. There are no lies in good faith. Sincerity enables us to enter the tent of the Lord as pilgrims and guests. The sincerity of our

heart is the lateral entrance to the temple, the one from which we too, sinners in the company of the publican (Luke 18,9-14) can enter, and like him pray, be understood and listened to. If this secondary door had not been there, the tent of the Lord would only be home to the just, and thus would remain devoid of many beautiful people, even if they were sinners: sincere people.

Lying takes many forms. A particularly pernicious one is slander: «Whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others» (Psalm 15,3). Few things show the performative capacity of a word or words than slander: slander creates a new reality by saying it, changing the world by speaking. Perverse words create evil and darkness while we say them. It is a demonic creation, which reminds us that God and good are not the only masters of the word. We speak to bless and we speak to curse, and the wonderful possibility of making people better with our blessings (and being made better by the good words of others) is balanced by the experience of being made worse by bad words and making others feel worse by bad-mouthing them. However, while gratuity can be distorted if misused, the word is unable to resist such abuse. It is less powerful to this respect than gratuity for all its weakness, which while not being God is still better equipped with devices that protect it from manipulation. Instead, Satan also speaks, even demons use words to try to change the world, and often succeed. Magic is also a matter of words, even blasphemy is a word.

By binding himself to words, God decided to share their strength together with their fragility. When, with infinite joy and gratitude, we wished to write that "The word became flesh", we discovered that the word had become vulnerable and fragile like the flesh of a child, and then a wounded, humiliated, crucified word, a cry of abandonment, a risen word riddled with sores. The Psalm thus reaches one of the most ancient, controversial and important uses of the word: the oath: «Who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind» (Psalm 15,4). The nature of the oath is immediately revealed, an instrument at the service of the truth of the word, an aid for the fulfilment of our promises.

We invented oaths because we had learned about the power of perjury, we knew the infinite pain caused by broken agreements, and of communities, families, entire cities destroyed by false and empty words, the disasters created by lies, by those who prefer false interests to the truths of one's own words and those of others. The word is the soul of trust, the rope that binds people and communities, on which the entire social building is based. In Rome, the god of oaths was called *Dius Fidius*, closely linked to the word *fides*-trust. If we lose contact with the truth of our words, when winter comes, we will end up walking on ice too thin to support the weight of our steps. Each promise is based on our faith in the words being spoken, on the hope that there is something serious, something beautiful, something more behind that breath; "something" for which we have not yet found a better word than *truth*. If we did not believe, hope for and love this very real possibility, we would never say "forever", we would never say "I love you", "forgive me", or "excuse me", and we would not believe others when they said it either.

However, this urgent need for true words clashes with the millennial evidence of the fragility of our words and of others, with the inability of staying faithful to a given word when the cost of fidelity and loyalty increases. Thus, men invented tools to strengthen their words and as a consequence pacts. They added gestures (e.g. the handshake), witnesses, objects (salt or flint thrown on the ground during the making of an agreement), and above all they inserted the words into religious liturgies. We wrote our covenants and promises and then placed them on the altars, we promised to tell the truth by putting our right hand on our heart or on the Bible, hoping that their truth (of the Bible and of the heart) would also give strength to our words.

An oath is a sort of *contract* with our own words, committing ourselves through other words to pay a price in case of a betrayal of the words that we ourselves are pronouncing. We ask our different words to come to the aid of our ordinary words, which we know are weaker than our sincerity. "I swear by my children", is an ancient expression that has remained in our language to this day. The maximum strength of an oath was reached when pronouncing: "I swear to God", associating divinity as a guarantee of the truth of our words. By swearing an oath, we call upon greater words today so that they may save our words of yesterday from their fragility tomorrow. Humility is the root of oaths.

Despite the criticism of the oaths that we find in the Gospels - motivated by the rather formal and empty use of that instrument very recurring in the Hebrew Bible, which ended up weakening the strength of human words and the invocation of God - the Church and the West have continued to resort to oaths to reinforce our words. But then, the secularization of our culture brought with it a progressive abandonment of oaths, and we found ourselves with increasingly weak words, with increasingly fragile promises and agreements, in the illusion that mortgages and sureties could be enough to support our

weak words of today. I am not surprised that Psalm 15 ends with mention of the economy: «Who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent» (Psalm 15,5).

Usury, but also the manifestation of power and desire for control masked behind gifts, gifts that capture those who accept them in perverse relationships, bribes and corruption, are, above all else, words without truth. Before becoming bad economic transactions, they were false words. Behind these contracts and wrongful economic deeds, there are false speeches and words that have lost all contact with the truth. Usury is a perverse promise, because "a son who asks for an egg is given a scorpion" (Luke 11,12).

We enable our businesses, associations, contracts, and employment relationships, to be reborn every time we find a connection with the truth hidden within the words we say to each other. We will emerge from the crisis we are experiencing, which has been, and still is, a crisis of words and promises as well, not only by finding the vaccine for the coronavirus: we will also need a new kind of truth in our words. Great pains and suffering can generate a new sincerity.

We are beautiful in many ways, but we are truly beautiful when we have all the incentives and interests to tell a lie, and instead chose to tell the truth. The choice of telling a costly truth when lying is available to us at zero cost (or with an added profit), makes the truth even truer, more beautiful, divine. Because if only men and women can be liars, then only women and men can be *sincere*. In Eden, Adam was innocent, but he became sincere only after the expulsion. When he lost his innocence and knew the price of lying, he also learned the value of sincerity - and we learned together with him. *Sincere*: a beautiful adjective, entirely made for us, the value of which derives from all the lies that we have said and one day stopped saying, and from the lies that we could have said but instead we did not.