

The beatitude of thirst

The harp and the soul/15 - Psalm 42-43 helps us to speak and cry out for God in times of drought

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"The invocation of man is the very invocation of God. Man prays in the image and likeness of God: if not in his, then in whose image, in this the greatest of his works? Psalms are God's prayer".

Sergio Quinzio, A commentary on the Bible (Un commento alla Bibbia)

The thirst of the deer is actually the ordinary condition of adult spiritual life. Dryness is not absence, but a place of faith. Yet we do not become aware of this, until the moment in which an extraordinary "encounter" takes place...

The spiritual quality of our life depends on how we come out from a few decisive encounters. One of these is the one between the child we once were and the adult we have become. A meeting that with few exceptions arrives sooner or later in the course of our existence – within the pages of a book that we are reading, in a dream, while cleaning our room or setting the table. It always comes unexpected, there is never an announcement beforehand, it is not really a good meeting, but the ford of a tumultuous river. It takes us by surprise and finds us unprepared. It is always a decisive event. The encounter begins with an important question from the child: "Who are you?" We recognize the child immediately, because we can still see the face of the child that lives on in our soul in him or her. The child, however, does not: to him or her we are a stranger, we have changed too much for that child to recognize him- or herself in that adult. That "who are you?" resounds in us as something scary, taking our breath away. In that question we hear the echo of the one made by Elohim to Adam ("where are you?"), it brings back the question posed to Cain ("where is your brother?"). Once again, we find ourselves naked, exposed, feeling ashamed, and we cannot nor wish to answer. If we at that point still possess some small part of the innocence of childhood, that question can almost make us feel like dying. Then, our whole life flashes before our eyes in an instant and an endless poignant longing for purity, for truth and for all those first words that we feel have been lost forever, is born.

If that adult is someone who in his or her youth heard a true voice loud and clear and answered it, the encounter becomes even more terrifying. "Who are you?" becomes the question that that first calling addresses to the man or woman generated by that very same vocation. That child tells us, with his or her mere presence that: there was a different promise. Even when life is working out, having brought us fruit, esteem and recognition, the feeling that the original promise was different from the one that seems to be fulfilling itself, because we have betrayed it, it much more powerful and truer standing in front of the child. That great betrayal took place bit by bit, without us knowing or wanting it, but the voice that that child had followed and the voice we are following today no longer speak to each other, and they don't understand each other, they have become strangers to each other. After these nocturnal encounters with the angel, you will either be reborn or start dying forever. «As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"» (Psalm 42,2-5).

Thus begins the marvelous Psalm 42, with which the second book of the Psalter opens, and which also embraces and connects to Psalm 43 through its refrain ("Why are you downcast, O my soul?"), forming one single song. The metaphor of the thirsty deer that after a long pilgrimage reaches a dry and dried-up stream is rich and powerful. It belongs in spiritual literature, inspiring one of the most sublime spiritual songs that exist (that of John of the Cross). Whoever has heard the belling of a thirsty deer claims that it is a disturbing sound, a heartbreaking lament that you never forget. A sound that would have struck ancient Middle Eastern man, more capable than us of reading and deciphering the complaints of creation. That psalmist, perhaps exiled to the north, in the region where the Jordan was born, far from Jerusalem and his temple, took the most excruciating animal cry that he had heard and turned it into the song of his soul longing for the God of his youth who was no more. The Bible is full of words that have been borrowed from nature and the animal kingdom in order to say what human emotions cannot express: the burning of a bush, a cloud resting on and covering a mountain, the fire on Mount Carmel, the gentle breeze, Balaam's donkey.

Nostalgia for a wonderful past in the midst of an arid present occupies the very center of the song: «These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy praise among the festive throng... therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon - from Mount Mizar» (Psalm 42,4-6). Hence, the thirst of this deer is not the good thirst of those who are coming to the source of water. It is the thirst of those who wander in the desert looking for water in an oasis well known in other areas, but which has now unfortunately dried up. Hence, it moans, yearns, cries out, and roars with a thirst that cannot be quenched because there is no water left. It is not easy to use the image of thirst to speak of the relationship with God. A certain kind of religious literature dissolves the metaphor by equating faith with the water that quenches our thirst. Thirst would then be an upward movement for man, the anthropological question that God answers with an offer of faith. From this perspective, there would be nothing religious in the experience of thirst, which would then only be the premise of faith, the antechamber of religious life that would begin only once you reached the source and finally drank from it - thirst ends when it encounters water. For many, this is what faith really is, and there are in fact several verses and passages that support such an interpretation of water and thirst in Scripture (John 4,13-14).

Each psalm, however, is a combination of many different things put together; it is a stratification of different meanings and experiences of faith and humanity. The psalm also suggests something different about this thirst. Thirst is not only preparing oneself for a religious experience, it is already faith in itself, and it already constitutes a relationship with God. A time of thirst is a time of faith: "Everyone in Scripture dies of thirst, and what is this universal thirst if not God thirsting for himself? I have always thought, since I learned of it, that dying with this verse on one's lips would be a nice way of non-dying" (Léon Bloy, *Le symbolisme de l'Apparition*, 1880). God is mentioned 22 times in this psalm. A desperate song on the absence of God is also one of the psalms in which the name of God is mentioned the most in the entire Psalter. The desert in the Bible is a place for meeting with God. The Promised Land is not the only place where God lives, nor is the temple. Moses did not enter the Promised Land to tell us that even the desert and its thirst can be the tent in which to meet God, perhaps the purest and truest encounter there is with him. His dying outside of Canaan is also a way to eternalize the promise and his desire.

The psalm then warns us about a typical mistake of any man or woman of faith, that of identifying faith only with water. A rather common mistake made by those who think and experience faith as a stable bivouac in an oasis rich in water, which when found at the end of that first journey you never abandon again. Here the deer rests, serene, having quenched its thirst in that new garden, from which it will not move away in search of new peregrinations. This is the vision of faith as consumption of spiritual goods, as comfort, as the full satisfaction of the religious consumer. And forgets however about discipleship and the wandering Aramean. Psalms 42-43, on the other hand, remind us that thirst is the original condition of adult spiritual life, because even if we find some source along the way, we will immediately have to pack away the tent, resume our path without delay and quickly relive the same experience of thirst-faith again. That crisis of faith is not about dryness but about the extinction of thirst. As long as we keep the thirst for God and for life alive, we are walking the only good way, even better if we do so in the company of the poor, the thirsty and the hungry. Biblical faith is to cry out for God in the infinite times of drought, because no experience of the divine can satisfy our desire for paradise. There is no water capable of quenching the thirst for God on this earth, and if we feel that our religious thirst has been quenched, it is very likely that we are drinking the water of idols, which tend to work as a vending

machine for thirst-quenching drinks. It is interesting to note a detail: even if the Hebrew text speaks of a deer (*'aiâl*), tradition has always interpreted it as a female deer in this psalm. Perhaps because only mothers really know the crying out for certain absences, and only they have truly come to know the paradoxical beatitude and bliss of thirst.

However, this psalm also includes a beautiful metaphor for the evolution of a vocation. It begins with a first source of water, that of the first meeting of youth. It then continues all through life, experiencing thirst, wandering in search of that first water that we cannot find anymore, and while we wander our parched throat fills with the cry of God. To then end, perhaps, with a different source of water, that we will find where and when we are no longer looking for it - it is so beautiful that some of the last words spoken by Jesus and referred to us by the Gospels, are: "I am thirsty". We live this ardor as an experience of imperfection, of lacking something, sometimes of failure, and we forget the pure bliss found in thirst - "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice", who hunger and thirst for me. We regret the water of our early youth because we do not understand that that water was above all intended to ignite the thirst and then move thirsty pilgrims around the world. Until, on a blessed day, we finally understand that it is precisely within that indigence that the religious sense of life is hidden and can be found. That is where the poverty and purity that we desired on that first day, confusing them with the water, can be found. And, on that day, we feel like the solidary friends of all those thirsty and hungry for bread and for justice, of all the destitute of the earth, and we finally become poor. Because we discover that true faith is not about having or possessing, but about a promise.

On that day, we understand that there is in fact a good answer to that child's question "Who are you?": "I am you having grownup. I have changed a lot, it is true, the sun of the arid desert has darkened my skin, it has marked my face, the road has covered me with dust, my pain and that of others has hurt me, life has left me with its stigmata: that's why you don't recognize me. But it is me, look at me, I am you. Do not be afraid, I have not betrayed you; I have become the only good thing I could become. Believe me: I never stopped yearning for the same water you yearn for. Believe me: my promise is yours. Come, trust me, give me your hand, and walk with me: a thirsting and wonderful life awaits you".