

What wealth can redeem

The soul and the harp/16 - The <second immortality> of accumulated goods and the way of fraternity

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"Dantes, who three months earlier aspired for nothing but freedom, was now no longer content with freedom and aspired for wealth; it was not Dante's fault but God's who, by limiting man's power, aroused infinite desires in him!"

Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

Psalm 49 leads us to reflect on the nature of wealth and its promises of eternal life, which, if interpreted the right way, are not entirely false.

We desire wealth because it increases our freedom. Among the freedoms "bought" by wealth, the most fascinating and tempting is the freedom from death and suffering. Here lies the root of the religious nature of wealth, which has the potential of becoming a sort of idol to us, because of its traits that make it resemble a divinity. In the Gospels, Jesus himself was the one to put wealth directly in competition with God, because it promises a different kind of immortality than he does. Elohim did not forbid Adam the fruits of the tree of life in Eden because that prohibition would have been ineffective, that is how strong the desire for immortality is in men and women. Wealth attracts us because it seems like the closest thing to the elixir of eternal youth that exists on earth. *Eros* (love) and *Plutus* (wealth) are the two gods who, each in his own way, never stopped fighting *Thanatos* (death).

In fact, the promise of wealth exerts an almost invincible attraction on us because, like the promise of the snake, it is not entirely false. A rich man is less exposed to the vulnerabilities in life, he tends to live in safer homes and has access to better care. This is also the reason that being rich is considered a blessing from God in the Bible and in many cultures - it is no coincidence that we use the expression "goods", that is, good things.

The religious power of wealth grows in line with how many aspects of social life that are covered by the market and money, and it was always vast to begin with. Even in a pre-modern society, wealth flowed from what a strictly economic sphere to the point of reaching paradise and purgatory (the market of indulgences). In fact, we must not think that wealth is only important within a market economy: money was already a deity well before the spreading of capitalism. Because in a world with a scarce circulation of money, and with wealth concentrated to a few zealous hands, the supernatural power of money was even greater than it is today. If on the one hand, the increase in the social areas that are covered by the markets increases the importance of a currency, (if you can buy almost everything with a currency, the currency will become almost everything). On the other hand, its wider diffusion into a greater number of hands reduces it; hence, it is not easy to calculate the algebraic sum of these two opposite sign effects. Greed, avarice and envy towards the rich were no less frequent in the Middle Ages than they are today and the social dynamics behind Judah's coins, behind the drachmas and the talents were not too different from those behind our euros - market development does not reduce social envy, but directs it in less harmful directions. This is why biblical economic ethics to this day has lost none of its ability to

speaking to us about our work, our wealth and our poverty: «I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle...Those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches? No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them - the ransom for a life is costly» (Psalm 49, 4-8).

Psalm 49 leads us to reflect on the nature of wealth and on its promises of eternal life, which, if interpreted the right way, are not entirely false

In yet another of the absolute masterpieces of the Psalter, the psalmist, son of prophets and Job's and Qohelet's teacher, teaches us through a universal song addressed to all humanity: «Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike» (Psalm 49,1-2). The *riddle* concerns the relationship between wealth and death, the *proverb* can be found in the chorus of the psalm: «People, despite their wealth, do not endure; they are like the beasts that perish» (Psalm 49,12). The central theme of the psalm is *redemption*. In ancient Israel the Law of Moses (Exodus,21) foresaw that in the case of some crimes, a death sentence could be commuted into money and therefore redeemed. The Psalm knows these legal norms very well, and knows that its reader knows them too. Hence, it also knows that money surely can redeem you from death. The psalm, however, intends to say that wealth can only delay death; it cannot redeem the *mortal* condition of being human, because Socrates is as mortal as he is man. The psalmist skips the penultimate victory of wealth and focuses on its ultimate defeat.

Therefore, seen from the perspective of his mortality, man is truly just like the animals, the rich are just like the poor, the wise like the foolish, and we find ourselves within a horizon of cosmic equality: «Do not be overawed when others grow rich, when the splendour of their houses increases; for they will take nothing with them when they die, their splendour will not descend with them» (Psalm 49,16-17). Many wise men have understood this vanity of wealth. But we can understand it too, as the poor understand it when they see rich unhappy people getting sick and die, and the rich understand it when they experience that their riches are not needed for those few really important things - the sincere rich are aware of many of the *vanitas* that are ingrained in their riches. The reason for the impossibility of the redemption of life is beautiful indeed: "The ransom for a life is too costly ". Human life cannot be redeemed because the price to pay would be too high. Once again, economic language returns when speaking of faith, which generally leads us on the wrong path. Here, however, the economic metaphor may actually suggest something good. The value of human life cannot be redeemed in exchange for money because having infinite value would also require paying an infinite price. This is the anthropological basis of the non-marketability of human life: there is no market for human life because the meeting between supply and demand would take place indefinitely; the equilibrium point would be too high to be able to find it on Earth: it would take Paradise. What if we could find a good sense to the metaphor for the "price" paid by the crucified Christ here? The value of *gratuity* can be found here: gratuity does not have a price because it is in fact *priceless*, because its actual price would be infinite. Hence, whenever a monetary price is placed on a human life, every time we try to buy a person or parts of him or her, we are denying Psalm 49, which actually has its root in Psalm 8 – «You have made them a little lower than the angels» – and in our being made in the "image of God". If God is infinite, each of his images is infinite as well.

If we took these words seriously, then we would have to say that wages are not a true measure of the value of our work. A part of infinity remains infinite, and an infinity of a lower order is still infinite. Our work is worth infinitely more than our wages, which therefore should be interpreted as a counter-gift, as a sign and symbol of gratitude. Hence, they should not be too different or unequal - I probably sound both naive and idealistic, (I am, and I am doing everything to continue to be so), but I still can't get used to a market that pays the work day of a consultant as much as a month worth of work of a labourer.

Yet in the universal equality in the face of death sung by the psalm, there must be something even more profound. In the consciousness of its poets and scholars, humanity has always sensed that, underneath (or above) the spectacle of true inequality and true injustice created by wealth and poverty, there is also an equally true dimension of equality amongst men. Certainly, in being born and dying, in terms of pain and suffering, but not only. Economist Adam Smith, (*The theory of moral sentiments*, 1759), also had an idea on this subject, when he said that if we were to add up all the joys and sufferings we would find that the rich and the poor are more similar than we generally think. Because the rich have sources of happiness that the poor do not know, true, but there is also an unhappiness in great opulence that is unknown to the poor, as there are sources of joy, that only the poor with their different freedom experience and which the rich envy them. It is a good thing that this strange equality between the rich and the poor, Smith added, is known only to philosophers, because, if it were evident to everyone, people would value wealth much less, they would stop working to increase it, and economic development would stop, which in his opinion is based on a sort of "providential illusion". In many things in life, well before wealth and poverty, we are truly equal. Both the rich and the poor fall in love, and are left and abandoned, betrayed and deceived, wounded and blessed, all afraid of pain and death. It is thanks to this "first-hand equality" that all we need, in to in order to bend down and look at those we meet lying "half dead" along our way, is to recognize them as "a fellow man". We would seize to be human if before rescuing him, we asked him for the size of his bank account.

Looking at life from the perspective of its last day should therefore increase the feelings of equality among us all. However, for the feelings of *fraternity* to grow, something else is needed as well. The psalmist is able to forget the penultimate victories of wealth and he can neglect their second immortality in his song. We, however, cannot: we cannot forget that between the day of birth and that of death, the two days during which animals and men all resemble each other in their ephemeral and contingent creatural essence, different existences flow in very different ways. The philosopher, the poet and the theologian do their job by reminding us that wealth does not redeem death and therefore, in the end, it is not worth it. The economist, the social scientist, the politician, on the other hand, know that what happens between that first and last day is very important for the moral and spiritual quality of our own and everyone else's lives. Therefore, wealth is worth it. Hence, after having meditated on the vanity of everything under a starry sky or during a funeral, we must not rest until every child who is born can grow up in a world where the scarcity of goods does not prevent him from living a dignified life. Where the material conditions of his family do not become too heavy a burden to enable him to spread his wings and fly. Where there are some very rich people, who will be able to live two hundred years with the help of organ transplants, and others, who will die of malaria at the age of three. Wealth does not redeem everything but it can redeem some things, at times, it could work to redeem many people from unworthy lives and *therefore* it must be equally distributed and shared. Life cannot be redeemed through wealth, but wealth can be redeemed through communion: «People who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish» (Psalm 49,20).