

Like an ephemeral butterfly

The soul and the harp/20 - The art of counting our days is an essential yet rare spiritual craft

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"Back in the day when God created all things, he created the sun. The sun is born, wanes, dies and returns. And he created the moon. The moon is born, wanes, dies and then returns... He also created man. Man is born and dies and then never returns."

Sudanese song by the Dinka people

Psalm 90 reminds us that the fleetingness of existence can be overcome by tuning our hearts to that of the universe. And then, every morning, continue our work.

At the origin of spiritual life, there is an experience of the absolute. A rare

experience that can happen, at any age, when we sense that we are just a grain of sand in an infinite sea, that there is a sense to the sea and to ourselves, and it is the exact same sense. If philosophical life begins with the wonder of existing-in-the-world, spiritual life begins with the wonder of this double-single sense; when we understand that we really are like an ephemeral butterfly, born to fly only for just one day, but the thrill of that "mad flight" is the same thrill of the universe. A photograph that captures a single moment can be as beautiful as the best of films, even brighter. Our time is a mere moment in time, but it has the same quality as God's time. Because the absolute has entered our time, and we into his, and they have become one and the same. And when we manage to tune our hearts to the heart of the universe we feel the same beat, and we discover that they both beat in unison – perhaps, prayer is nothing more than this.

The psalms are full of this awe, sung in many different notes and tones, as many as there are human emotions and feelings. Different notes, that do not always harmonize, because while we carry out the exercise of living we are aware that it will "shortly be evening", praise is therefore intertwined with sadness, the gratitude of being alive and loved also touches on the envy of God and of his eternal dawn. We cannot understand much about prayer without also taking the suffering that arises from the envy of God seriously. This typical and paradoxical form of suffering of religious man is even more terrible in the psalms because in that humanism, death is not a different continuation of the same flight under God's wing, but merely a sunset without a new dawn – «Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you?» (Psalm 88,10). It takes a lot of theological imagination to find anticipations of the Christian resurrection of the dead in the Psalter, in Ecclesiastes or in Job. The great gift of the Old Testament lies in this radical absence of consolation, which, by not placing a paradise beyond our death, invites us to find it down here instead, where it truly exists. If this flight under the sun is our only flight, if we in fact will not have a second chance, then our story is as brief as it is serious and important. Faced with the experience of the *vanitas* of life, the Bible knows that a real disappointment is preferable to a false illusion, that despair can be a good point of access to existence, certainly better than any invented consolation. The resurrection of Jesus was announced within a humanism in which it was not supposed to exist, and its wonder lies in that it was announced to us by a Bible that did not know of it until that very "first day after the Saturday".

Psalm 90 is a peak, an eight thousand meter peak in the Psalter. Poetry is intertwined with wisdom, prophecy with theology: «Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, you mortals." A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night» (Psalm 90,1-4). You are always and forever, we sentinels on a single watch, prophets for one night only (Isaiah 21).

And there, in that one brief moment, we truly meet God, and we truly are able to touch. You wound us, we wound you, to the point of nailing you to a cross. This is the mystery, this is the amazement, this is the drama of human life: «They are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered... All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away» (Psalm 90,5-10). And the song of the second Isaiah, poet in exile, is heard once again: «A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field... Surely the people are grass» (Isaiah 40,6-7).

The psalmist does not really know the origin or the root of this sad and ephemeral human condition. In some verses, he seems to tell us that it is a consequence of Adam's guilt and sin, winking at the first chapters of Genesis - "*children of Adam, return to the dust*" («For dust you are and to dust you will return»). A line certainly present in the Bible, certainly not the one that shines the brightest, even if it is very rooted in the people and in the temples of all times. The spiritual line of this psalm is different. It is a sapiential text, a meditation on the human condition, on how to live our brief passage here, well. We find it in one of the central and most suggestive verses: «Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom» (Psalm 90,12). The wisdom of the heart comes from learning to number or count our days. Because knowing how to count the days is a gift, it can come from a prayer, like the wisdom asked by Solomon as his only charism. The psalm tells us that the biblical art of counting the days is not the natural and spontaneous counting of our days, which is not enough to acquire this wisdom. A clock and the calendar are not enough here. We need a different kind of teaching, a pedagogy, someone that reveals something to us that we cannot do on our own.

Because human history display above all our errors in counting the days. We count them the wrong way when we are young, when they appear infinite and death is something that only affects others. We count them the wrong way, when we reach old age and the sadness for the end that is drawing near does not enable us to live the moments that we are still living, well. And we count them in an even worse way when, while enchanted by wealth and power, we believe ourselves invincible and immortal, and repeat to ourselves: «You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry» (Luke 12,19). The art of counting our days is a spiritual craft as rare as it is essential. The first lesson in this apprenticeship is the evidence of a great waste, when the powerful and true impression that we have invested our lives in the wrong places suddenly envelops us, and we become certain that the time for living has flown by and our life has remained tied to a pole. The psalmist will have received and learned this first lesson. Because if he prayed for the wisdom of knowing how to count the days, that gift must already have reached him - the first (and perhaps only) gift of prayer is the consciousness of needing what we are asking for, so prayer gets what it asks for in the moment we begin to pray: beginning to pray is already received grace.

The psalmist, however, did not stop at that first lesson. We can see it in the verse that immediately follows it: «Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days» (Psalm 90,14). Here, is the second lesson of the wisdom offered: while we understand, that we have miscounted our days, that we have not even seen them while we were actually living them, a new and different prayer begins to blossom. The sadness for the waste of our past days disappears, the pain for the wrong accounting of yesterday goes away, and a new hunger is born: "Satisfy me now with your grace-love-fidelity (*hesed*). Satisfy me in the morning, and from today onwards it will always only be morning: the morning of God". Something, similar to the paradoxical joy that Qoheleth found beyond illusion fought with disappointment, is born: «This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them - for this is their lot» (Ecclesiastes 5,18).

Reading the last verse of the Psalm is therefore full of beauty and of hope: «Establish the work of our hands for us - yes, establish the work of our hands» (Psalm 90,17). A phrase repeated twice, as in a liturgical game of choirs - "the work of our hands, the work of our hands; establish, establish". It is a splendid thing that at the end of a song of high meditation on the human condition, as the conclusion of a psalm that revealed the transience of our life and prayed for the wisdom of our heart, we find a verse on the work of our hands: *we find work* being mentioned. Perhaps because this new morning always comes as part any regular day, within the same line of work, the same family, in the same community as always. A new morning that finds Sisyphus in the same exercise of pushing the same boulder towards the same mountain. When that tragic hero, who is all of us, finally becomes aware of his destiny, and proceeds to thank his boulder, because he understands that it was that very boulder that pushed him up the summit every morning. We learn to count our days well when, one morning, we go back to the office and immersed in the same documents as always, surrounded by the same colleagues, we feel the same vibration of the universe on our desk, we see the same reflection of the ordering gesture of Elohim in the early morning of creation.

Psalm 90 is the only psalm that the Psalter attributes to Moses: «A prayer of Moses. The man of God» (Psalm 90,1 NLT). We do not know in what moment in the life of Moses the editor imagined him composing this song. For some, on Mount Nebo, at the end of his life, far from the Promised Land, waiting for God's kiss on his lips. Maybe, we do not know. I like to imagine Moses singing the last lines of this hymn to life while he blessed and praised the work of the artisans who built the Ark (Exodus 35). He looked at them and prayed: "Establish the work of our hands" and the people answered: "Establish it".

Hence, who knows if whoever composed this Psalm did not start from the end? While he was finishing one of his works, he felt the sadness for the vanity that would have swallowed up even that work of his, and he felt the typical sadness of someone who is faced with the ephemeral essence of life. And right there a new prayer was born: "Give substance to this work, so that it too does not pass by like the wind: save it, even if you cannot save me". From there, from that SOS to protect that work from a sea of nothingness, that ephemeral poet came to the Absolute and asked him to teach him to count his days. And while he was making that prayer he discovered that he was already counting *one day* well, the one during which he was finishing his work. As we work, morning after morning, we do our job and finish our flight. Ephemeral, infinitely brief and utterly beautiful.