

Gifts that we call merit

The soul and the harp/25 - **Wealth and talents serve to free those who have been at the receiving end of suffering and evil**

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"They are the "children of youth" because those who were destined to die between the ages of twenty-five and thirty had to hurry to procreate. A poor prize, from the desert and spears around the house. For a philosopher, both yesterday and today, it was nothing more than nails in the flesh"

Guido Ceronetti, The book of psalms

Is it possible to associate God with our blessings and save him from the curses of others? To thank him for our happiness while not condemning him for our

misery?

Excess is one of the golden laws of life. She is the mother of generativity, the sister of generosity. We do not bear fruit without first sowing with large generous hands, without throwing a large part of the good seed among the thorns, along the road and among the rocks, because if we wanted to sow only in what we think to be good soil, nothing really good would be born. Good soil can only exist between brambles and rocks, and is ultimately reached by those who are willing to waste plenty of seed in their excessive throws. In order to be able to hope that a true prophet will be born in our community we must first generate ten false ones, to have an excellent student we must allow him to grow alongside a thousand ordinary ones, to generate an act of agape we must wait for it while it matures mixed with our own selfishness. That wasted part is as necessary as the much smaller part it eventually will generate. All avarice is sterile, all magnanimities are fruitful.

Nevertheless, the most important form of excess is not the one that comes out of our heart, but the one that enters it. It is what we receive, not what we give, it is what we see happening within us and around us, that bread that nourishes both our friends and us "while we sleep". Then one day, we finally understand that the most beautiful things that have blessed our life are not the fruit of our commitment or efforts, but solely gifts, only and truly grace, only and always providence. Intelligence, decisive talents, wife or husband, daughters and sons, friends, community, health, sense and joy for our interior life, being able to be moved by a poem ... did not enter our life for some merit of ours: they simply *found* us on the trail of a mysterious freedom made out of love. Being "good soil" is not a merit of ours - the soil does not cultivate, care for or fertilize itself. It simply is. And that is the first root of gratitude.

This excess is the heart of Psalms 127 and 128, which find themselves at the very centre of the series (from 120 to 134) called "the pilgrim": «Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat - for he grants sleep to those he loves» (Psalm 127,1-2). In these well-known and beautiful verses, the psalmist affirms the priority of the excess of grace over our merits. This incipit, this succession of "in vain" which reminds us so much of Ecclesiastes, (a book that the Bible, like Psalm 127, attributes to Solomon), is one of the most beautiful explanations of what gratuitousness/grace is. To understand this we must continue reading the second part of Psalm 127

and then continue with 128: «Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them» (Psalm 127, 3-5).

Here, the great biblical category of *blessing* further developed in the next psalm, returns: «Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the Lord» (Psalm 128, 1-4). Biblical happiness, unlike the modern tradition that largely tends to associate happiness with pleasure and sensations, refers to fertility and generativity, concepts that are also very much present in the Latin *felicitas* (in which the prefix *fe* associates it with foetus, female, fertile). However, there is much more to be found in these two Psalms. There is a fundamental theological idea of the Bible, according to which happiness, and therefore goods and children, are the *blessing* of God. This equivalence between earthly happiness and divine blessing is not only fundamental and central to the ethics and spirit of modern economy, but it is also at the centre of common sense and the wisdom of many communities and families - Psalm 128 is the most commonly read psalm in both Jewish and Christian marriage liturgy.

However, it is precisely in this splendid series of beatitudes that many of the pitfalls that are still at the heart of Western humanism remain hidden. Too often, in fact, we have read, and continue to read, these two psalms in an amputated version made of the first two verses of 127, and thus the whole argument on blessings ends up falsified and corrupted. We can speak of goods as a blessing in the Bible, because *first* we have the moral certainty that goods are in fact at a *much deeper level* a gift. Saying that those who "built the house" are not really the builders but "the Lord", means recognizing that even in the most concrete and everyday things, where it is evident that although we are adding brick by brick with our own hard work, at a deeper and therefore truer level those bricks and that sweat are also made of grace, *they are providence*. And here we must reopen a never concluded discussion on merits and grace. When we see someone who is successful, in one shape or another, it is very rare that we do not recognize at least a certain amount of personal *merit* in that success. Hence, while attributing part of it to luck and favourable circumstances, we take the part attributed to personal credit present in that success and make it the pillar with which to support the entire social reward structure. And then, for the sake of symmetry, we follow up with the same logic for failures and defeat since, although there is always a certain amount of bad luck and unfavourable circumstances behind any crime or misfortune, there must be a least some percentage of subjective guilt as well. We isolate it and make it the main criterion for ordering both punishments and the world. It is also possible that human beings feel the need for a system of guilt to be able to legitimize merits, because in a world where misfortunes are considered to depend too much on unfavourable circumstances and too little on subjective guilt, there would be no ethical bases for *attributing our successes to our own merit* either.

However, this is precisely where the first two verses of Psalm 127 suddenly turn terribly serious. Take the case of Giovanni, that particularly brilliant fellow economist. He had an excellent career, achieved success and wealth. He came from a poor family and had to study a lot for his degree and then his doctorate. His parents made sacrifices to enable him to study, first in Italy then in the US. He has won a large number of competitions always proving himself to be the best ... It is hard to deny that merit constitutes a good or large part of his success. Then, however, we take a closer look and we discover that even this linear and generally non-controversial reasoning can become complicated and perhaps largely change. We realize that Giovanni was born into a family that loved him, he studied for free for over twenty years, he had excellent teachers who believed in him, and he grew up in a peaceful and stimulating environment. And if he studied hard to win competitions and write scientific articles, his ability to study and to commit himself was also in large part a gift, because he found it within, as part and the result of all that excess life. People are also born and become poor because they lack any opportunities to be able to apply themselves, commit and make the effort.

If Giovanni had grown up elsewhere, that same DNA would not have had the conditions to study hard and be as successful. All this is not to diminish, humiliate or devalue Giovanni's talent and virtue at all, but to emphasize that first there was something else, an excess that created his "home" for and with him and, even long before that, his very talents. When we forget this invisible builder - and we do so increasingly today - a series of theologies, sociologies and economies of prosperity tend to spring up too quickly which, while they ethically and religiously praise and legitimize success and merits,

religiously also tend to delegitimize the losers, reading non-talents as non-merits, to the point of morally justifying inequality. To be able to call the victors blessed they must also call the poor cursed. We cannot stop there, however. This discussion has not fully satisfied us yet. My granddaughter Antoinette made me see this with her essential form of theology while we said our prayers before lunch: "We thank God for food, but how do children who do not have any food pray?" Thanking God and life for our blessings that we received as gifts not due to merit, is not enough to justify God in the face of those who do not have access to any of those goods. Every religious man who attributes his blessings to God tends (almost) inevitably to separate God from the cursed part of the world. "My mother forced me into prostitution since I was eight years old: if I ever meet God I want to spit in his face", a young Brazilian woman once said desperately to a missionary friend of mine. If I associate the grace of God with my gifts, how can I save him from the misfortunes of others?

A certain kind of honest atheism was born because it could not find a convincing answer to this very question, and preferred to kill God in order to save the poor. Someone else managed to save his or her faith, while reading these psalms sitting on the dung heap next to Job or on the Golgotha under the crucifix. Then, one day, which somehow always seems to arrive too late, he understood that his true blessing is finally understanding that he received those riches and talents to use them to free those who instead have been at the receiving end of nothing but suffering and evil. An irrepressible need was born inside of him to go down to the streets and under the arcades to offer and serve breakfast, to try to generate some true "thanks" after too many uttered swearwords. And, as it becomes an inherent gift, say to the poor: you are not cursed. Say it, repeat it, and never stop, to the point of giving life.

Dedicated to Don Roberto