

And the song gave way to life again

The soul and the harp/27 - We return from exile and leave our mourning behind us when we find our voice again.

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"However great the pain of a loss may be, the task of avoiding the most irreparable and decisive loss is immediately imposed on us: that of losing ourselves. Therefore, when facing the death of a loved one, we are peremptorily called to become the procurators of death for that very same death".

Ernesto de Martino, *Death and ritual crying in the ancient world (Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico)*

Psalm 137, the psalm about the exiles, delivers a great message on how and why to take those

ancient harps into our hands again with renewed feeling.

Our age is part of a long eclipse of places, and therefore of the sense of earth. With this progressive disenchantment of the world, we have not only stopped believing that the earth was full of gods, we have also forgotten that places have a soul, different but no less alive and effective than the soul found in people. We invented *space*, the anonymous and rational space of maps, and thus we forgot to recognize places through their unique vocations, their signs, their own destiny. In the Bible, God is a voice that speaks within places. God is not *u-topical*, because he has his place: an altar, a mountain, a temple. Places that can never really capture God, (who remains free of ours and his own places), but keep the stigmata of his touch forever. Biblical man could be nomadic and wandering because his territory was marked by the true presence of God, hence even if he was a pilgrim he was never lost. Time and space are often enemies; places, however, are often friends of time, because they are where it can be found - within a community, in a family, in that land - where each generation passes on life to the next. Moreover, common goods can never be destroyed, if they go from taking up space to becoming a place.

Having long forgotten the language of space and places, we do not understand what *exile* really means in the Bible. To understand some of its dimensions, we must compare it to another extreme experience of ours: mourning. Because the *crisis of presence* is part of both the Babylonian exile and the process mourning. In great moments of mourning we experience a sense of uprooting, we are emptied of our certainties and values until we too risk passing with those who have passed, dying with those who have died. The great challenge during the Babylonian exile was to succeed in not dying together with the homeland, with the destroyed temple, with the Promised Land, with their defeated God. It is no wonder then that Ezekiel in his book calls his deceased wife and the destroyed city of Jerusalem by the same name - "the delight of my eyes".

The process of elaborating a great loss, (a very difficult operation today), is to not to let our loved ones exit our lives completely, while also avoiding that their continuing to live in us does not lead to the beginning of our death as well. For Israel, elaborating the experience of exile was in essence the great undertaking of not forgetting Zion, while not reminiscing too much about and hence risk dying with it: «By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung

our harps » (Psalm 137,1-2). It is the wonderful psalm of the refugee or exile, perhaps the most beautiful elegy in the Bible. The psalm that more than any other directly tells us the collective spiritual and ethical process with which Israel tried to make sense of its greatest tragedy, in order to continue living.

The first image that reaches us is that of musicians on a strike of sorts, perhaps a group of former temple singers. They hung their harps on the branches of the willows (or poplars) that grew along the fertile banks of the rivers of Babylon. There they sat together, and together they cried. Then, one day, they stopped singing. A choral fast of artists, perhaps the first in human history. Perhaps this is why Psalm 137 has always been beloved by artists, musicians and poets alike (from Camoes to Verdi, from Bach to Quasimodo). It cannot be sung while in an "unknown land" – *adamah nekhar*. One can only intone a funeral cry, raise a ritual lament, or scream desperate words trying to sublimate them within a sacred representation, in such a land (Psalm 137,7-9). Singing the songs of the temple, however, no, it is not possible: it is not possible when in the wrong land. And so, came the answer of those singers, loud and clear: we cannot. «How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?» (Psalm 137,4). Because in that humanism the first singer and musician are constituted by the walls of the temple, then the homeland, and only at the end do men and their instruments come in. Those songs can only be sung in Zion, and will only be sung again when returning there. Certain "leaps" can only be made in "Rhodes".

The psalm then introduces us to a typical kind of human cynicism and sarcasm: «For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"» (Psalm 137,3). There is a typical form of malice, among the worst possible, in forcing those in mourning to make others laugh - *sarcasm* literally means "tearing the flesh" *sarx*. Just as the Philistines did: «While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us!"» (Judges 16,25) – as the powerful have always done and continue to do with the poor, with women, with their victims. During that fast of the arts, the people, together, relived the same experience Ezekiel had lived, the great prophet of exile: «He spoke to me and said: "I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent"» (Ezekiel 3,26). Ezekiel, a priest without a temple, a prophet without words; singers and musicians with mute harps left hanging. Tremendous and wondrous images that say so much, almost everything, about the grammar of life of those who honestly follow a voice.

At this point, we find an oath or a form of self-curse in the psalm: «If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy» (Psalm 137,5-6). Those refugees were terrified of the possibility of forgetting Jerusalem and their God. They were terrified because they felt the fascination of the gods of those rivers of Babylon, they felt in their flesh the temptation to lend their harps to songs different from those learned in Zion. Hence, they bound themselves to a promise, made to God and with their soul. Promises are also the rope that binds what we are today to what we were yesterday, in order to save what we can become tomorrow from the precipice. Every promise is a prayer that asks the future not to betray its origin. When life leads us into exile, at first we just want to hang up our harp, throw away the pen, keep quiet, and just cry and mourn. The Bible tells us that these fasts are actually good, that even these mutations are words of life. We feel disoriented, uprooted, estranged, filled with an infinite "nostalgia for Zion" and for that wonderful temple within and among us, and above all, with an infinite nostalgia for the God who no longer exists because he has been destroyed - by others, by us, by God himself. We only want to sit and raise loud laments to heaven and life. This phase can take a long time. For some it lasts a lifetime, and they never return home.

Sometimes, a remnant, a *small remnant* - a minor part of that destroyed community or a corner of it, still alive somewhere in our wounded soul – picks up the harp again one day, and a new song begins. It begins there, along the same rivers, surrounded by the same torturers and executioners. We do not know why, we just know that we have to sing. We can sing the same songs of our youth, and understand that that voice that accompanied us during the destruction and then into exile, that unknown voice, feared as the voice of an idol or of nothingness, was actually the same good voice that spoke in Sion, but we did not know it. A new understanding that is all grace, all gratuitousness. We understands that God is not afraid of exile, and that there is no better place than the rivers of Babylon to sing and praise. And to the question: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?", comes a new answer: *sing them exactly as you sang them in Zion: I live here too, and I have never left you alone.* The end of exile has begun.

For some, this new psalm is the very last song, sung together with the angel of death. Others have been singing it for many years but are not aware yet because they confuse it with mourning. Not all Jewish exiles returned from Babylon after the edict of Cyrus. Some never got over that great grief, and let themselves die. Some integrated with the Babylonians, and never returned. Only the children and grandchildren of those few who managed to retrieve their harps from the poplars along the rivers to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land, returned after seventy years. Those who learned how to play while in exile returned. All mourning really ends when we discover that we are still able to sing. The most beautiful psalms of Israel were composed when one of those exiled singers found the spiritual energy to pick up his harp again. They retrieved them from the branches of the trees and began their singing again. Those who learn to sing the ancient songs in a new unknown land return from exile. When a new soul plays the ancient harp and other new songs are born.

There are spiritual songs, poems, works of art, prophecies, that are born in times of joy and light that flow as an excess of the heart during the beautiful days of our lives, when we are masters of our own hands and our words, obeying us in creation. These can be authentic works of art, beautiful music, true poems, and authentic prophecies. However, there are other spiritual songs, other works of art, different prophecies, which are not born like this at all. Instead, they need a throat glued to the palate, harps limply hanging from poplars, hands with arthritis, composers suffering from deafness, blind painters, spastic and stammering speakers, writers who speak of God when they no longer know who he is or if he really exists. These different works of art are not the fruit of our strength but of our weakness, these words do not obey us because they are free, these gestures are not our gestures, this God is not our God, this paradise is for others. These are the works of gratuitousness, the songs that should not exist, the spirituality that moves heaven, humans that can touch the angels. We have the Bible because someone was able to sing while in exile, he learned to play his harp again along the rivers of Babylon. And he never stopped.