

With God's very own name

The soul and the harp/29 - There are prayers that are also civil songs, songs of work, of time and of bread

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"The prohibition of images was a capital precept that would fatally be violated. First of all by YHWH himself, who had shaped man "in our image and in our likeness". YHWH had wanted to create a being in the image of himself - and the inclination to create something in the image of himself would also be transmitted to that being".

Roberto Calasso, The book of all books (Il libro di tutti i libri)

Names and images are central categories in the Bible and in Psalm 147, which reveals how poverty can generate wealth within

this humanism.

In some Italian regions, among those my region, in certain intimate dialogues mothers and fathers call their sons and daughters with the same names usually used for them. Saying to them: "Come on, mom, be good", "Dad, you're great." They talk to their children like this, but sometimes they keep calling them this even as adults. It is not something that you will find written in any grammar book; you will not learn this in school. We repeat it because we heard it from our parents, during the wonderful days of our childhood. Different words assimilated by osmosis, and then transmitted from one generation to another, part of that transmission of the essential things in life. They are among the most beautiful words found in the dialogues of the heart, in those delicate and private moments, which contain all that typical and unique tenderness that usually flows between parents and children, always nourishing both, above all, during moments of great joy and great pain.

The Bible tells us that the first one who called us by his own name was and still is God, when he created us "in his image and likeness". By calling us, he spoke of himself, and he continues to repeat our name at every moment. Because if on the one hand the biblical God is the most transcendent and different divinity of all, on the other hand there is nothing on Earth that resembles him more than a human being, there is no heart more similar to his than ours, there is no name that sounds more like his than ours. The Hebrew Bible took away the image of God from us, but it gave us a wonderful image of man and woman instead: by hiding the face of God from us, it exalted our own. Hence, every time you love and respect the name of a man or a woman, you are loving and respecting God's name too; and, by the law of reciprocity, every time a man prays and praises the name of God, he is praying and praising the whole of humanity, every man and every woman.

This is the positive outlook that the Bible, with tenacity and resilience, has regarding men and women. It sees the limits, the sins, the murders and the fratricides, but first and above all, it sees the reflection of the image of God in it, unable to leave Eden. It sees the many gestures of men, but first it continues to see it in their dialogue with Elohim at the end of the day. Like the mothers and fathers who, even when life leads their children to do bad and nasty things, continue to think of them as pure and beautiful in order to save themselves and to save them, continuing to call them "dad" and "mom" until the end, even behind the walls of a prison. Between faith, hope and agape we find the same type of relationship that binds the three divine Beings: each one also containing the other two, each facing the others at the

same time, it is impossible to separate them without destroying them all. The same thing happens in the Psalms, in which the more populated by feelings of sadness, disappointment and pain, the stronger and greater is their gaze of hope-faith-love that dominates the entire Psalter. Which makes it perhaps the most beautiful book of all, because it is the more capable one of speaking to us of heaven from the underworld, of hope in the midst of despair, of beauty in the midst of ugliness.

The strength of the Psalms lies in their truth. A real hell is preferable to a make-believe heaven, because as long as we call hell by its real name we can always wish for a heaven, which we would no longer want if we thought that we had already reached it: « Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds... Sing to the Lord with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp» (Psalm 147,1-7). *It is good to sing hymns to the Lord.* It is beautiful and good to praise YHWH, it is beautiful and good for God, but it is also beautiful and good for us. The psalm begins with a *praising of praises*. It is the moment of self-awareness of the person praying, which arrives (if it arrives) when we realize that the first prize of praising is to become aware of its beauty and intrinsic gift. When we find that we pray to praise God, but as we sing, we feel that it is really God who is praising and singing to us. We say his name and one day we realize that it is God who is actually pronouncing ours, and that in saying our name he is saying everyone's name, the name of every creature, the name of the stars and of the entire universe. And it is a wonder. And as we look for the finest and highest words and notes to praise God, we are learning the finest notes and words to praise one another as well. Perhaps there has never been a splendid word designed to praise God that a poet somewhere has not also used for a loved one, and perhaps there has never been a love poem that someone, on a different day, perhaps without really knowing it, used to sing to God. All this is also image and reciprocity. By blessing humans we also learned to bless God, and by blessing God we are already blessing men and women, even if we do not know it.

Being the image of the Creator immediately renders our praise to God a cosmic praise: «He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name... He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call» (Psalm 147,4;8-9). Being the image of Elohim makes us greater than our human image alone. We feel a deep cosmic fraternity from an early age, only children can truly feel cats and birds, flowers and leaves as brothers and sisters. We should be able not to lose it as we age. If life works out, this great fraternity should grow with us, ending with a song for our Sister Death. Inter-human fraternity is not enough, although already immense; it is much too small for us. For human brotherhood and sorority to become authentic humanism, we must learn to really feel the stars, the sun, the birds, the whole of nature as our brothers and sisters - there are few songs (if any) more biblical than the Canticle of Francis. Immensely beautiful and delicate, herein lies the reference to the «young cravens who call». In this verse we find the ravens that fed Elijah in his flight (1 Kings 17,6), but also the birds of the nest guarded by the Law of Moses, which commands not to capture the mother bird who is hatching her eggs and guarding her little ones, but to let her fly away, «So that it may go well with you and you may have a long life» (Deuteronomy 22,7). A Law of YHWH that also peers into a birds nest, placing thereby an equivalence that can appear both too bold and stupendous to us. The promise reserved for those who let the mother fly away without capturing her is the same promise in the Fourth Commandment, "Honour your father and your mother": «So that you may live long and that it may go well with you» (Deuteronomy 5,16).

In the Bible, everything is creation: everything is a child. This is how God sees the world, this is how he looks at us, and we, his image, learn to see the world in the same way, even if all creation is still «groaning as in the pains of childbirth», because it «waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed» (Romans 8,19-23). All creation groans and waits to be finally looked at and seen like this. Never as in these years of environmental crisis and destruction of the planet, have we been in a position to understand the Psalms and that mysterious passage from Paul to the Romans: the earth suffers and waits for men and women to finally reveal themselves for what they are, to behave as its children, and as the image of God the creator and father. Psalm 147 also distinguishes itself by being a civil song. There are neither priests nor kings, David is not mentioned and the temple is never alluded to. It is the citizens that raise their song, those who know the times and rhythms of the seasons and work, the value of peace and their daily bread. A psalm that has always been well loved by farmers: «He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast? He sends his

word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow» (Psalm 147,14-18). The entire earth is wrapped in a good, kind gaze, and everything is governed by providence.

After having given us thus far beautiful words about God and about us, the Psalm ends by directly praising the word, the Covenant and the Law, which are its culmination (147,19-20). The word is seen as a message sent for us, an intelligence that makes us discover the order and meaning of creation: «He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly» (Psalm 147,15). The word is also *logos*, it is reasoning and order. Israel held the word to the highest esteem, to a degree that seems incomprehensible to us today. It led to an extraordinary experience with the Patriarchs, with Moses and the prophets, «... there was only a voice» (Deuteronomy 4,12). Having given up the image of God, they gained immense competence in the word, they had to learn to draw God with words, and they discovered the thousand dimensions hidden within the biblical word, as well as in human words. A great poverty ended up producing an infinite wealth. Perhaps we would not have the extraordinary Western literary tradition that we have, without this biblical word deprived of images, which forced it to become an image without also becoming idolatry.

When John wrote the Prologue of his Gospel, one of the most brilliant passages in history, he had many things in mind, but he certainly thought of the words of the Psalms, of that *logos* capable of blessing man while he was blessing and praising God. Telling us that that *logos was made flesh*, that it became man like us, he told us many things, all of them marvellous, and he called us once again by the same name, the name of God. And he continues to call us this every day.