

Midwives of a different kind of joy

The soul and the harp/30 - True freedom is freeing oneself from misery, not from the «perfect joy» of poverty

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"The righteous, in whom the Lord has created the desperate need for joy, will have joy".

Sergio Quinzio, A commentary on the Bible (*Un commento alla Bibbia*)

There is a different form of joy that can only come from a certain kind of poverty. The psalms and the prophets know this well, and liturgy reminds us of it every day.

Joy is not only a desperate need in every human being; it is also a right. A right to joy that is not written in any kind of Constitutional Charter but in the soul of people. A fundamental right that must be defended

especially during times of great crises, when it is threatened to the point of being denied. Every empire, not only the Egyptian one at the time of Moses, tries every once in a while to deny its subjects their right to feast and celebrate, because in order to kill hope in a different future, the temptation to deny the right to experience joy is too strong: it never completely succeeds, but it is always attempted insistently. However, there is also a duty to joy, and it is an essential one. Because when joy disappears in a community or society, hope and faith in life disappear right along with it. Sometimes there is more agape in safekeeping the ultimate joy than in loving pain, because a joy guarded by the increasing sadness of years and years and events is a collective good, a blessing for all, a tenacious announcement that we in fact are greater than our destiny.

In general, children and young people are the ones to bring this special gift to families and communities alike. However, if there aren't any, or too few of them, so called "Cyrenians of joy", adults guardians of the flame, are needed to perform the function that children carry out by nature, out of love, with a difference, the agape joy of adults and the elderly has a certain scent of heaven and perhaps the greatest power and ability to convert those who touch it. Much like gladness/letizia (from laetus: manure: fertility), this biblical joy is not simply happiness, nor is the right to this joy the right to the simple "pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Philadelphia of 1776. This form of joy is not something you seek, but kept safe once it arrives, without having been sought after because we were too busy seeking the happiness of others. It should be kept as a precious gift, like the last sip of the last bottle of wine from your grandfather's cellar, like your wedding ring. It is not happiness, because this joy is not expressed with a plethora of smiles. Just one smile is more than enough, but when it blooms, it manages to pierce the sky enabling us to catch a glimpse of God.

Liturgy is a collective exercise in the safekeeping of joy. A community practice that ensures that joy will not be lacking in the community even when, individually, no one experiences it anymore, or does not yet experience it. Even during the days when no one guarded it, or found any reason to sing of joy, we arrive in the choir, open the book of Psalms, begin to sing, and joy is born right there out of the nothingness of our individual joys. Like all gifts, even liturgical joy may end up not being accepted; but, just like any gift, this refused gift nevertheless still remains a gift, it is right there, alive, and in a mysterious way, it works and changes things. This joy is a common good, of which no one is the

master, no one produces it on his or her own, but it serves and loves everyone, and must therefore be safeguarded by everyone, if we wish it to continue to live on. Liturgy, then, is a multiplier of joy in the world, a device that ensures that the joy present every day is greater than the sum of the individual joys of both women and men. Liturgy, in particular the liturgy of the hours and the prayer of the Psalms, is the gift of a vicarious kind of joy; it is the manna of gladness when we have run out of bread in the desert. Another and different opus operatum that guarantees us a joyful presence in our communities even when, due to neglect or pain, we would not be individually capable of it. If we are faithful with our appointment with liturgy, its joy is faithful to its appointment with us, even when we welcome it with tears in our eyes.

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This is the way it is been for millennia, and it will continue to be so, as long as a community capable of singing its joy remains on Earth, as long as there is a single man or woman left capable of singing a psalm. Because the Bible is not only the gift of a repertoire of words, offered to us when we have finished our own or have not yet found them, it is also a gift of joy not only replacing ours but multiplying it. The psalms of joy are always propitious, but their most propitious time is when we feel beggars for joy, when we are crossing a desert, when we would no longer find the strength to sing on our own. Oh, how much less happiness there would be in the world without the Psalms! «Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people. Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp. For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory. Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds» (Psalm 149,1-5).

A new song. It is the hymn to joy, the penultimate of the five Songs of the Hallelujah that close the Psalter. A psalm written in all probability after the exile, when that "remnant" that had returned from Babylon had to relearn their faith in their God. And it began with joy, because after a long exile, faith can only be reborn: when exile ends there is no "going back" to the faith that was there before, you "move on". Israel had done everything in order not to lose its faith of the patriarchs, of Moses and of the prophets, but when the exiles returned to their homeland that ancient faith was only going to be able to generate a future by first being resurrected. Passions and Golgothas are not enough to continue living. It is not enough to remember, to safeguard the memories and the past: a new covenant, a new promise is needed. And therefore also a new source of joy, the first energy needed to restart, the first resource required when, after an exile, a new reason to continue the race is necessary.

This is why the voice of the so-called Third Isaiah can be heard so clearly in this psalm, the anonymous prophet who lived just after the Babylonian exile, the author of the last chapters (56-66) of the book of Isaiah, the great cantor of the new promise and of the resurrection of the people after exile. This prophet, monumental as a prophet and immense as a poet, did not celebrate joy and hope because he was unable to see the sins and evils of his present. Actually, he saw them quite clearly and denounced them in no uncertain terms. The exercise of the duty of joy however was stronger, because a prophet knows that without a new source of joy there is no restarting after any kind of exile. The author of these psalms of joy, perhaps a direct or indirect disciple of that great prophet, executed the same exercise, and sang the same song.

The prophets are hence the prime ministers of biblical joy, revealing its true nature and mystery to us. Telling us that this is a different kind of joy. When we think of Isaiah, Hosea or Jeremiah, we do not think of happy people or revelers. On the contrary, tradition and their texts offer us extremely solemn and serious images. Yet the prophets, all true prophets, are essentially the midwives of joy. Precisely in that they unmask the illusions of all, especially of communities in times of great crises, when a desperate need for joy becomes increasingly stronger, often invincible, becoming so desperate that the demand ends up generating the offer – regarding the false prophets, professional dispensers of a cheap, false kind of joy. True prophets do not offer us fake forms of joy they do not possess. They can only offer us the only true joy they know, the kind that arises during and after an exile, the kind that has nothing cheerful over it while still being fully joyful at the same time. Their promised land is the land of the yet-to-be, not because they are creators of utopic ideas but because they are, quite simply, true honest prophets. And a prophet is in fact an announcer of the yet-to-be, because no "land of the already here" can ever fully satisfy him or her fully, because every "already" is always smaller than the

promise, which while originating in that small unsatisfactory "already", is loved precisely while it announces its yet-to-be.

A joy similar to that of Federico Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, when after all the tragedies and wickedness of others the last scene is delivered to the music and to the different smile emerging on the lips of a poor and deceived woman, to celebrate the joy of live, to believe again, despite everything. The prophets tell us that we die a hundred times over, but that the ability to resurrect a hundred and one times is part of the human repertoire, and that the very last time it will in fact be another hand that will resurrect us - and then we will understand that that hand was present in our other hundred resurrections as well, and we did not know it: this is the most important "invisible hand" on earth.

Finally, Psalm 149 is a song of the poor, of the *anawim* or faithful remnant of YHWH. Among the many un-false joys of the Bible and of life, that of the poor is the most sublime and stupendous. It is a joy that we can still experience to this day, if we have the great gift of being friends with someone poor. The Holy Spirit - tradition tells us - is the "father of the poor". It is also their father because it nourishes them with a different kind of joy than we, who are not poor, have (even if we increasingly would like to become poor). This kind of joy is the closest to that announced by the Psalms, to the kind that needs the exiles, the kind of joy of those who know that sooner or later liberation will come, and that, perhaps, it has already begun.

During my lifetime, I have had the gift of attending psalms sung by various poor communities. If there is a paradise - and there must be - its songs and harmonies will be very similar to those I heard during those encounters. Where joy is not born because we are under the illusion that poverty will soon end, but because we truly feel loved and saved within that poverty. Poor people who know how to praise overcome the curse of poverty and even end up calling it "sister". And a liberation begins in that moment, sometimes from the curse of misery, it must however never become the liberation from joy, from the *perfect contentment* of poverty.

There is a kind of joy in the feasts and celebrations of the poor that the rich do not know, and this ignorance is one of their greatest poverties. Those who know and have lived with the poor have tasted that special kind of joy, and have never forgotten it: «This is the glory of all his faithful people. Praise the Lord» (Psalm 149,9).