

The prophets answer for everyone

The exile and the promise/ 19 - Solidarity with one's community is special, and wholly fulfilled before God

By Luigino Bruni



Published in the [Avvenire](#) 17/03/2019

«We have lost the ability to sing. Man in his anguish is a messenger who has forgotten the message. The Bible is not a book about God: it is a book about man. From the perspective of the Bible: Who is man? A being placed in labour, but who has the dreams and plans of God»

Abraham Heschel, *Who is man?*

There is a great similarity between the task of the prophet and that of a sentry. Prophets love this image that was part of the daily and secular life of their cities, and they often come back to it - the night-time song of the sentry of Isaiah (Chapter 21) is

among the most intense and profound passages in the whole Bible. The prophets share the task of the sentinel, with their absolute loyalty to their guard post, masters of both sight and hearing, knowing how to stand on the borderline between being inside and outside, guardians of the threshold that separates one kingdom from another. The sentry has a very clear mission: he must blow the horn, warn and alert. This is all he has to do, but if he doesn't do it, the consequences could be very serious indeed. And here we find ourselves in the middle of Ezekiel's vocational drama, while Jerusalem falls, the sentry returns: «Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me... If you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood» (Ezekiel 33,7-9).

The task of a prophet is not merely to transmit messages addressed to the people. His warnings are also *personalized*, especially in times of crisis. He must speak both to the righteous and to the wicked, with differentiated messages. But here we read that the sentinel speaks above all to the wicked, it is for them that he carries out the main part of his ministry of salvation. The prophet is therefore a great resource for those who are in a state of error and sin, as well as a great friend. He conveys what is often revealed to be the ultimate warning. The wicked may not listen, but the prophet cannot save himself if he does not carry out his task as admonishing messenger.

Here we find a decisive aspect in all prophecy: the solidarity between the prophet and his community. A solidarity that in order to be fully understood must be understood in its legal meaning. If the prophet does not carry out his task, he becomes *jointly and severally liable* with the wicked who have not been converted. It is as if by answering yes to his calling, the prophet signed a surety, becoming an actual *guarantor* raising his hand to answer for his people and save them (Job 17). It is also due to this *objective* civil, criminal and spiritual responsibility, that vocations and how we respond to them are tremendously serious matters of great weight and importance. And they also invite us to reflect on the relationship between guilt and responsibility. A prophet who does not carry out his mission well becomes guilty of another man's sin. But prophecy does not only include vicarious suffering; Ezekiel also tells us that a prophet performs a function of *vicarious responsibility* as well: «I will hold you accountable for their blood» God holds the prophet accountable for the fault of another, and the prophet answers for him (responsibility, that is, to respond). We do not know exactly what this responsibility consists of, what the content of the question addressed to the noncomplying prophet is. It could be something similar to the

responsibility and questions asked of us for the errors and sins of our children, spouses, friends that we have not warned and cherished enough; or could it be the same terrible question aimed at Cain: *where is your brother?* The same unique question, to which every prophet and every man must answer, first of all to his or her own conscience, which the prophetic calling amplifies and radicalises to be a sign and message for all.

The calling of a prophet is terrible. He cannot stop speaking of and reporting what he hears and sees. If Ezekiel in the first six years of his mission had stopped admonishing his people he would have betrayed his vocation and shared the same fate as those who remained or became wicked by omission. This also helps us to understand something essential in the dynamics of prophetic-charismatic communities. When we see someone lose their way, lose themselves and eventually fall, we have no way of knowing if perhaps a prophet was hidden somewhere in the back, behind that non-salvation, a prophet who did not have the courage or strength to speak to the person in question to the very end. Nor do we know if he or she lost his or her way because all prophets died, or fled, or were cast out, or because they became false prophets by not being able to resist in their guard post bare during the coldest of winters.

«In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen!" Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was on me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent». (Ezekiel 33,21-22).

The city has fallen. There was nothing else to be added. Ezekiel probably remained silent during the siege of Jerusalem. Now a new phase of his life and that of his people begins. And so the word returns, even if that word will no longer be the word before the siege and death of his wife, the «delight of my eyes». The words of life do not return, they can only rise again after they have been able to die first. Ezekiel will speak again, and will say new words generated by the death of the bride, the holy city and its temple. His mutism is interrupted thanks to the arrival of a refugee, a fugitive, a person who escaped a massacre, someone who had fled a war, who had fled destruction. Even today, those of us who find ourselves to be mute can find new words following the visit from a refugee, who with his or her silence full of pain teaches us to speak once again.

Ezekiel gives us some of these new and different words immediately: «"Son of man, the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he possessed the land. But we are many; surely the land has been given to us as our possession!'"» (Ezekiel 33,23-25).). The first message of the word that was found was for the survivors of Jerusalem, those who had survived the fall of the city, who had not been deported by Nebuchadnezzar and had remained in the ruins of the city and the temple. A new ideology was slowly starting to grow among them (ideologies, like weed, are the first things to be reborn among ruins). Those who escaped thought themselves to be the new Abraham, to whom YHWH had given the Promised Land. And so they felt the masters of those ruins, the true continuers of the Covenant; consequently, they considered the exiles to be cursed and repudiated by God (and hence that they were entitled to seize their lands as well). The survivors had given themselves the status of the "remnant of Israel", misappropriating a stupendous prophetic category. Ezekiel continues his profession as sentinel and harshly challenges their illusion. Their life and idolatrous practices clearly say that they are not the "remnant" but mere "survivors": «"Say this to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says:... I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud strength will come to an end'"» (Ezekiel 33,27-28).

It is not uncommon for a group of survivors to identify with the "prophetic remnant" in a new promised land after a great community crisis. It starts from the concrete fact of actually having survived and turns it into a spiritual and messianic event. We have escaped death and are *therefore* the legitimate custodians of the authentic charism. Ezekiel tells us how dangerous these ideological operations can really be and that the legitimization of a group of survivors can only come from an external source, outside of the group itself: there is a need for a true prophet to smear ointment on our heads (much of the effort of the community lies in knowing how to identify this true prophet, because the market is full of false healers smearing ointment on heads that are already bowing).

While Ezekiel criticizes and refutes the false claims of the survivors of Jerusalem, he has equally true and severe words for his companions deported to Babylon as well. After the fall, a radical change had taken place in the attitude of the exiles towards the prophet, generated by the fulfilment of his prophecy. The mistrust, ridicule and sarcasm of the early years were replaced by an unprecedented success,

which translated into a coming and going of people who came to him to attend his performances. And so a word from YHWH arrives to whisper the key in which to correctly interpret this new moment of 'spring' in his ear: «As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain» (Ezekiel 33,30-31). *Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain*: they are only consumers of prophetic words as if they were goods of comfort. Once again, we have economic practice as a test of the truth of the heart: the dignity that prophets attribute to economics is always surprising!

The voice continues to speak to him: «Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice» (Ezekiel 33,32). What a beautiful image: listening to the songs of the prophet is no different from listening to any singer. Furthermore, this historical clue suggests that the prophets sang their verses, a fact that embellishes the already stupendous prophetic vocation depicted in the Bible. Ezekiel understands that this newfound success of his depends on mere superficial, artificial and banal aspects. Prophets must be very careful in interpreting the reasons for their (brief and rare) moments of success, because they are almost always similar to those that Ezekiel mentions. A prophet will eventually lose his way if he misinterprets the success he sometimes may experience, a very common mistake when it's someone like Ezekiel, with a brilliant personality and many talents. And so he could go on for a long time happy and deluded by his own beautiful voice and seductive rhetoric.

It was the voice that revealed the deception to Ezekiel. He listened, understood and then wrote for us as we continue to sing and console ourselves with the wrong hosannas.