
THE POOR ARE NOT CURSED

THE NEW, REAL FEAST DAY IS WHERE THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ANY 'MERIT'

by Luigino Bruni

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«E forse pace avremo
quando tutto sarà perduto
e inutili sentiremo le parole
e questi incontri che ci illudono.

...
Allora l'angoscia sarà
d'aver scoperto – troppo tardi –
questa smarrita esistenza ...»

David Maria Turoldo, *O sensi miei*

Vigils mark the rhythm of the holidays and the waiting period before them. It is the time to prepare and mature for that different day and to create and form a desire for it. Children are the great experts of vigils - birthdays, the first day of school or trips. They know that in the "village" Saturday is a beautiful day because it will be followed by an even more beautiful one. Because they know that the holidays are real, that they are not only the illusion of a desire strangled in the moment in which it is fulfilled, because their parents, teachers, friends are real, because the gifts are real, too. It is the reality of the feast day that makes desire and expectation real on its eve. One of the innovations of our time is the invention of vigils without a feast day, because in the era of holidays marked by business we only have vigils. Collectively not knowing who and what we will really celebrate, we remain in a continuous succession of "village Saturdays". Christmas Eve will be followed by the eve of the sales, and then that of Valentine's Day, and so on throughout the year, where new vigils will make us forget the sadness of the denied feast day. And the year will fly by very fast, because it has been robbed of the *different time* of the holiday, which would be there to make us taste eternity - even if we live for more years than our grandparents did, we are living much shorter days than theirs were.

If anyone wants to rediscover the meaning of holiday and vigil (and we must do so soon, because a culture that does not know the reality of the "feast day" does not know that of life and death, either), it must be looked for among the poor, because it is there where the holiday continues to live, together with its non-vain expectation. First, however, we should make the sense of poverty and the poor our own again, and free them from our maledictions. And, here too, our best teachers will be the prophets.

“And the word of the Lord came to me: »Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom

the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, 'Go far from the Lord; to us this land is given for a possession' «" (Ezekiel 11:14-15). The people who escaped the first Babylonian deportation read the exile of their own countrymen as God's curse. The distance from the homeland and the holy temple was seen as divine punishment, as a consequence of their sins. Religious pride nurtured the false security of being the elected ones, the true owners of the land, and so those deported by the Babylonians became those *deported by YHWH*. In the history of civilizations, there has always been an invincible need to find a supernatural justification for one's own misfortunes and, above all, for those of others. The most common (because the simplest) form of it was offered by the *economic* type of logic: those who suffer today are paying a debt for some sin matured yesterday, and those who rejoice are reaping the rewards of their merits. Thus the rich found themselves in a double paradise (that of the earth and that of heaven), and the poor lived in a double hell, imprisoned in a perfect pincer trap, without hope of liberation. Meritocracies have always needed (and still need) the poor who are deserving of their misfortune - like a stool on which the chosen ones could rest their feet to climb into their heaven.

The prophets, by vocation, put these easy and banal religions of merit and sin into crisis, and they reveal another logic to us, they show us another idea of poverty and justice: "Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone" (11:16). Jeremiah, Ezekiel's brother and master had also prophesied it: the basket of good figs is not the one left in the country but the one deported to Babylon (Jeremiah 24:1-2). Prophecy suggests another kind of theology, and when it is missing we remain prisoners of ideological schemes whose sole purpose is to justify our condition of being saved and, ultimately, our indifference.

This dynamic is often repeated even in ideal-driven and spiritual communities. Some people feel exiled, deported to foreign lands, dragged by some empire or demon that has proved to be too strong to resist. Those who stay at home feel the need to give a religious reading to the being away of others and to their own staying; and so to feel reassured and faithful they end up (sometimes in good faith) condemning those who are gone. There is a moral kind of separation created by those who stay, leaving the others on their heaps of manure, and then trying, like Job's "friends", to convince themselves and others that behind that misfortune there must be some hidden guilt. The prophet, on the other hand, continues Job's song, and keeps telling to the deportees, to those who have stayed at home, to us: 'I am innocent, and if in this story there is a guilty party it must be found in your wrong idea of God and therefore of life'. The prophets give voice to the cursed part of the world, and remind us that if there is a true God he must be sought first of all in the heaps of manure, in the camps of deportees, among the exiles, among the discarded and the cursed. It is there that he waits, and sometimes meets us, perhaps after we have been looking for but not found him in the places where we thought he was, and when we have lost all hope (the wonderful spiritual experiences are those that come when we are sure that nothing would come any more).

But Ezekiel tells us something even more powerful and revolutionary: YHWH promises the deportees that he will be a "sanctuary" for them. In an ancient religious culture where the gods' protection was limited to national territory, and where the exit from the land meant an exit from the area of the divinity's action, Ezekiel not only says that YHWH is alive and works also in exile, but that it will be his presence to replace the sanctuary they no longer have. The objective condition of exile, the lack of a temple and many dimensions of religious worship allowed that discarded "remnant" to make a qualitative leap in faith. They realized, thanks to the prophets, that God could not be confined to a place, that he does not inhabit only the sacred places, because his home was the whole earth and not only the promised land. God is greater than the religious cult with which we worship him. He is different and greater than our sacrifices and liturgies, because he is a lay God (one who lives among the people). This is an immense message even today, but it was something extraordinary among that people with a different and unique temple. "I will be your sanctuary": how many times discarded people and exiled communities have heard this splendid promise resound as true in their souls; and there, in the midst of foreign deities, feeling lost and desperate, they understood that nothing was missing, that they were not cursed or abandoned, but that they had been led into the desert to celebrate a new covenant, a new feast day, a new Easter. And the sky opened, Elohim came down and paradise began inside hell.

Israel's exile was a return to the mobile tent of the wandering Aramean, to the God who is nomadic like his people, and since he, too, is moving around he can become a travelling companion of every man and woman on earth, of all "those on the way". The great crises sometimes become epiphanies of a truer spirituality, of a religion higher than the roof of the temples, they can become returns to the poverty of the tent, and listening to different and infinite words. Just as it happened in that German prison at the end of the Second World War, when a prophet of our times, a few days before being shot for having followed the voice to the end, was able to write some words that are greater than his theology and were generated by the abyss of his exile: "What we call Christianity has always been a pattern – perhaps a true pattern – of religion. But if one day ... we reach the stage of being radically without religion ... what does that mean for 'Christianity'? It means that the linchpin is removed from the whole structure of our Christianity to date, and the only people left for us to light on in the way of 'religion' are a few 'last survivals of the age of chivalry', or else one or two who are intellectually dishonest. Would they be the chosen few? Is it on this dubious group and none other that we are to pounce, in fervour, pique, or indignation, in order to sell them the goods we have to offer? (...) How can Christ become the Lord even of those with no religion? If religion is no more than the garment of Christianity ... then what is a religionless Christianity?" (D. Bonhoeffer, Prisoner for God. Letters and Papers from Prison; English translation by Reginald H. Fuller). Within these words, which still leave us breathless because of their prophetic power, there are also Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the whole Bible present, the profound meditation of which had accompanied and nourished Bonhoeffer before and during his imprisonment.

We too can look at the condition of so many exiles who are left without a temple, dispersed to lands of different gods, and condemn them as cursed, guilty and deserving of their condition as Godless - what is our era if not a great mass exile from the temple? But we can also repeat the words of Ezekiel. We can and must

say if we want to be on the side of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and condemn the exiles, or keep with the prophets instead and tell a different story, one that sees a "presence" beyond the temple in our great exile. We can curse our world, but we can also announce salvation to it. Religions and communities can be friends with the poor, they have been many times and they are still when they know how to dispose of the meritocratic clothes designed and pinned to the gods by people without asking for their permission.

Prophets continue to be custodians of man and custodians of God. We stubbornly try to manipulate God and men every day; and the prophets, who are more stubborn than us, continue to safeguard them.