
“REMEMBER” IS A VERB OF THE FUTURE

KNOWING HOW TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE TRUE “REMNANT” OF OUR HEART

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“By seeking the beginnings of things, a man becomes a crab. The historian looks backwards: in the end he also believes backwards.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (English translation by Anthony M. Ludovici)

Religious signs are what most affect the earth and communicate the character of a culture. Temples, altars, aedicules, crosses, stems separate the areas of the sacred from those of the profane, they reveal and give names and vocations to the land, transforming spaces into places. The land bears our vices and virtues inscribed in its wounds. It accepts our traces meekly, it lets itself be associated

with our destinies, and it communicates with us through its mysterious and real reciprocity. Among the marks of prophecy there is also the ability to interpret the language of creation, to tell it to us, to speak in our place and in our name. What would the prophets say today seeing the wounds we are producing on our planet? What words of fire would they utter in front of our "high places" populated by idols? How would they prophesy in the face of our collective myopia and selfishness? Maybe they would scream, compose new poems or sing - they do actually sing *Laudato si'*.

"The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, and say, You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills, to the ravines and the valleys: Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places" (Ezekiel 6:1-3). Ezekiel prophesies against the mountains, made innocent accomplices of the infidelity of the people. Those hills, those valleys and canyons are also symbols of creation that "groans" waiting for human beings to be its worthy custodians. It is the animals, plants, soil and subsoil, oceans and seas that suffer the consequences of the transformation of our vocation from care-giving to tyranny every day, and every day more. The prophets also speak for themselves and in their place - still in between earth and man, between men and heaven, mediators nailed to crosses as messages of flesh.

Since its first settlement in Caanan, the people of Israel have constantly felt the seduction of the Canaanite cults. Marked by the rhythms and images of fertility, the charm of those simple, natural gods was very strong. They could be seen,

depicted, touched and the temptation of their sacred prostitution could be felt, which offered immediate ways of union with the gods on top of the heights. And if there had not been the prophets, YHWH, with the passing of time the name of their different and unique God would have become one of the many names, one of the many gods of the many pantheons of neighbouring and dominant peoples. The prophets are friends of God and friends of man who keep repeating: man is different because God is different. They keep God high and transcendent to keep man as high as possible, so as not to reduce him to a consumed-consumer of manufactured idols. The prophets ensure that the natural contamination that a faith receives from the encounter with other peoples does not exceed a critical threshold and that it does not make them lose the red thread of the covenant and the collective spirit. Without the religious contagion from Babylon, Egypt and the Canaanite peoples, we would not have many of the beautiful pages of the Bible. But if that mutual fertilization had entered into the medulla and into the heart of the Promise, Mount Sinai, the Law and the Covenant, that different people of the different faith would have been reabsorbed into the natural religions of the Near East. The prophet is also a watchmen because he plays the trumpet and gives the alarm when the contamination exceeds the critical point and becomes assimilation and syncretism. And he knows that there is a place where these contaminations cannot and must not enter: the temple, the place that guards our most intimate history, the altar of the pact, the heart of our name. And, as a consequence, the people of Israel must not enter the temples of other peoples and worship their divinities. Not only because those peoples are worshippers of idols (Israel has not always thought that all the other gods were idols), but because if a people begins to enter and pray in more than one temple is like saying that, after all, it really does not believe in any god (like the man who says "I love you" to more than one woman is actually saying that he does not really love any). That's why the struggle of the prophets at the sanctuaries of the high places tells us, in a poetic way, some very serious things - poetry always says very serious things.

When, for example, communities born of a charisma go through great crises, the temptation does not lie in the elimination or cancellation of the "God" of the first covenant, but in the introduction of other deities into one's temple that begin to join the first "cult". Prayers, songs and practices that are closer to the spirit of the time are imported, ones that are simpler and more comprehensible, which better respond to the tastes of the "consumers". Within a certain limit, these arrivals can help and have an enriching effect. But if these extraneous practices enter the "temple", and if we begin to frequent the temples of others without distinguishing them from ours, the contamination begins to undermine the pact and the promise; and soon the day comes when we find ourselves talking to our first God in temples that are the same as all others, and nothing will happen again - many existential, individual and community crises arise from operations of crowding at the place of the first meeting, which becomes so dense that we can neither see nor hear anything anymore in it.

But sanctuaries and temples were also places of sacrificing animals and children. Behind the great prophets' criticism of the Canaanite and Babylonian cults there is always the criticism of the use of sacrifice as a currency to trade with a merchant God. The prophets' very harsh polemic against gold and silver is neither an economic nor an ethical criticism of the money used for human trading; it is a theological and therefore an anthropological criticism, it is a condemnation of an

economic vision of faith - and therefore of life. Gold is very dangerous because it becomes the material for making idols: yesterday the statuettes of Baal or Astarte, today the products and goods that, like new idols, sell us a subspecies of eternal youth. The more gold we have, the greater the price we can pay for our sacrifices. Therefore, the thieves who profane the holy place are not thieves of things or money; they are religious thieves who take away man's dignity and reduce him to a servant of idols: "They cast their silver into the streets, and their gold is like an unclean thing. (...) They cannot satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it. (...) His beautiful ornament they used for pride, and they made their abominable images and their detestable things of it. Therefore I make it an unclean thing to them. (...) ... and they shall profane my treasured place [temple]. Robbers shall enter and profane it" (7:19-22). Money and gold are garbage when they are not used to live but to make all sorts of idols. This profound nature of riches is revealed in full only at the end ("An end has come; the end has come"; 7:6). At the end of life, when the radical difference between the riches (material and non-material) we have used to feed ourselves and others we have used to create or buy idols that are the sellers of illusions will become evident. Or in the other "ends", when in a big crisis, illness or depression we understand that we can start again only if we learn to recognize other riches that we have not yet seen, in us and around us.

At the centre of these very harsh words that the prophet raises against the heights, idols and infidelities of the people, another piece of the *theology of the remnant* reaches us as a ray of sunshine (the Bible could be told as a story of the faithful remnant): "Yet I will leave some of you alive. When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive (...) And they shall know that I am the Lord" (6:8-10). Yet: the prophets love this adverb very much, because it completes and sweetens their words of judgment. False prophets do not know this 'yet', because they are ideological and adulating people. But it is also the adverb of good educators, teachers, community leaders, who after having had the strength of judgement of truth manage to add the 'yet' of meekness and *pietas*, which is the salt and yeast of the dough they are kneading.

This passage about the remnant tells us something essential. When in exiles we want to try to really start again, two things are really necessary. It's not the *whole thing* that starts again, but a *part* of it, a little living rest. We had formed a family, created a community, a business. Then came the crisis, and then the deportation and exile. We got lost and contaminated by many peoples. If one day we want to continue the original story we must win over the nostalgia for the whole, not let ourselves be seduced by the very strong call of the whole thing, because, simply, that entirety and that whole are no longer there. But we can really continue our story based on that small part that has remained alive: two workers in the factory, one child, that one good word that has been saved from the many wicked things that we have said to each other.

The second thing concerns the meaning of the beautiful biblical verb to *remember* (they "will remember me"). In biblical humanism remembering is not a verb of the

past; it is *a verb of the future*. Remembering is an act performed in the desert, in the brick making workshops, in exile, and people remember to continue to believe in the promise that must come and will come. In the desert where we ended up because of the betrayal of our marriage pact we do not start again by celebrating a new pact on a new altar, but remembering that those words were true, because a true part of our heart had never left that church and that first altar. It is by learning to remember that one begins to rise again.