

EXISTENTIAL COMMENTARY: FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT TO LIFE TODAY

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From the book of the prophet Jonah (3:1-5.10)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, «Up! Go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the message I tell you». So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare; to cross it took three days. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city and then proclaimed: «Only forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown». And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. God saw their efforts to renounce their evil ways. And God relented about the disaster which he had said he would bring on them and did not bring it.

Jonah was considered an defected prophet. In order to understand better his defect, one have to wonder: “What makes a man a true prophet?”. According to a certain biblical tradition, there are four elements that characterize a prophet: inner sight and inner understanding of reality, a broad and long sight through the future, compassion and courage. The inner sight of reality let the prophet overcome the limits of appearances and enter the mechanisms of what happens. Thus abandoning a quick glance at reality, the prophet can understand it and its roots and can glimpse, in it, trajectories of development or decline. So, the foresight and compassion come from this understanding of reality: they represent the ability to anticipate the future and the will to take care of the present, to reverse the course of decline and to decide for the future, promoting development. To all this, we have to add the courage to announce the truth, even though it might not be accepted peacefully. Jonah lacks these characteristics and yet, twice, in chapter 1 and chapter 3 of the book, the call of a prophetic vocation is addressed to him. For this reason, we wonder why God is so stubborn. Why does He choose him as his prophet?

The character of Jonah is a great consolation for those who carry on, like him, without energy and without great spirit of initiative. In this time, marked worldwide by the pandemic and by a generalized feeling of “asthenia”, even spiritual “asthenia”, this page can help us to gain a new look at ourselves and at the reality we are experiencing. It enlightens even the quality of the announcement of salvation today.

We reflect on a passage, which is placed towards the end of the book of Jonah. For the second time, God addresses to Jonah a word, which echoes the first call of the prophet. In verse 1 of chapter 3 of the prophetic text, we find the two imperatives (קוּם וּלְךָ = *Get up and go*): they are the same as in chapter one. Again, they are told by the Lord. The recipient is always the same, but, at this point in the narration, Jonah is no longer the same: he is no longer the man “without history” that we find at the beginning of the book. The second call is part of a tortuous path in which the prophet discovers and constructs the face of his believing identity. Now, Jonah knows “who he is” and what role God played in building his history. For this reason, now, the Lord can ask him for a deeper act of obedience: «to announce to Nineveh the announcement that was first addressed to Jonah».

The second call “Get up and go” is not simply the request to gather the last remaining strength: Jonah has to become fully aware that his escape has been transformed, by God himself, into an inner journey in which the Lord has continued to manifest himself, quietly. This is the experience

of mercy and forgiveness, which man receives free of charge when he discovers that God loves him, in his misery. For this reason, the קָוָה of Gn 3,2 is not like a getting up after having slept for a long time. You can stand, when you become full awareness of yourself in such a way that the choices to be made are not a mechanical and automatic process of obeying, but the result of a contact with one's inner self. In this way, the new proposal for a journey to Nineveh keeps in mind the experience of forgiveness and mercy, which the prophet himself experienced.

This memory does not change the contents of the announcement, but the methods. The prophetic text does not tell the new "evangelical" style of the prophet. Here he is, Jonah, traveling the length and breadth of the streets of that city that he never wanted to reach. Now, he is enabled to announce God's mercy. In fact, he proclaims that the destruction of the city will come in forty days; the Lord does not grasp the Ninevites behind him, he gives a long time: forty days, the time necessary for a seed, planted in the ground, to reach maturity and sprout; it is an adequate time to see God's works and decide for Him, according to one's own responsibility. It is the time for mature decisions.

We can imagine that, in the womb of the big fish, God did not change Jonah's DNA, nor his character; he activated in him a new spiritual sense: remembrance, which makes him remember that salvation comes from the Lord (cfr. Gen 2:10). This is the special path of holiness that Jonah takes to be still a witness of God's mercy, which heals wounds and transforms what he touches. As Jonah "discovers" the way of being a prophet "in his own way" in the call of God, so today a special call to holiness and missionary proclamation is addressed to us. "Everyone on his way" is the great announcement of *Lumen Gentium*; "Everyone on his way" is the great announcement that is addressed to us once again in this pandemic time.

Everyone is asked to reactivate the spiritual sense of "memory" that makes us say: the salvation comes from God. The Lord entrusts us with the creativity of seeing an opportunity to build new bridges in a pile of rubble.

In the recent past, we have often wondered about the pastoral strategies to be activated, taking into account our secularized and sclerotic societies; in this time of Covid-19, the question about the strategies "haunts" us even more. The historical phase, which we are going through, can in some way be compared to the experience of darkness and emptiness, made by Jonah in the belly of the fish. After having given us back, still numb and bewildered, on the shore of our lives, the Lord asks us to announce what He Himself has made us experience in the womb of our history. Jonah lived an experience of profound mercy and, therefore, can resume the journey to Nineveh and bear witness to that mercy. What are we experiencing at this time?

In some way, the experience of the prophet Jonah witnesses that our personal experiences remain such, because they fall into our personal freedom. However, they are never really individual: the possibility of sharing this transforming grace and sowing seeds of hope and mercy in the world depend on our freedom to open ourselves to transforming grace.