

1. Thirst for the Face of God

On the day of my most recent birthday I was in Brazil, and I was woken up by my mentally repeating, singing to myself, a verse of Psalm 41, the one about the deer that longs for streams of water: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps 41:3). I remained deep in thought about this the whole day, because it was like the Lord had awoken me by telling me what the true and profound desire of my soul is, and so reminding me of why I live, why I have lived so far, and why I keep on living until my death. I live because my heart thirsts for God, the living God, and it is impatient to go and see his Face. It was like my soul had given me a pinch to wake me up from all my distractions and drowsiness in giving space to the one desire of the heart, the one longing that animates our life, though living out all the rest. I understood that there is something like a last call in this verse of Psalm 41, which I received as a precious gift, a treasure that I must not lose, a pearl not to let slip from the hand, to clinch to the heart.

When I returned from Brazil eight days later, it was Holy Week. I went on retreat to our nuns of Cortona, and I took psalm 41 as the theme for my meditation, encouraged by the liturgy of those holy days and by the Franciscan beauty of the Tuscan city and the areas that surround it. I had photocopied Psalm 41 from an edition of the Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, in addition to Italian. Thus I was struck by the title of the psalm as it is found in the Greek version of the Septuagint and thus in the Latin of the Vulgate. It says that this psalm is “for the end – *eis to telos – in finem*.” Other psalms have this title, but since this initial comment is often not included, or anyway is not part of the psalm properly speaking, I never noticed it. The comment says not only “for the end,” but also “for understanding: of the sons of Korah.” I do not dare get myself into exegetical questions. I feel I only need to express the impact of these two words in that moment, and how they helped get me to listen to that psalm and to God through it, and the impact on the days of retreat that I was beginning as Holy Week started. These words, “for the end,” kindled in me the awareness of how important it is to live conscious of the end, of the end of life. “For the end... for understanding...”: we should always, with this awareness, with this intensity, live all that God extends to us to lead us from our own origin to the fullness of life in Him. We should live all like this; every thought, every word we hear or speak, all should have intense awareness of the end, of the *telos*, of the final goal of our being and of the existence of everything and everyone.

This month of monastic formation, too, with all the teachings, the common life, the silence, and the personal and communal prayer, the work and services, and the moments of recreation and celebration, this month too we must live “for the end,” for the *telos*, the reason, the ultimate sense, the fulfillment of our life, of our vocation, of our faith, of our whole person. Not so much thinking about death, but recovering the end for which we live now, for which we live what we live now, in the condition in which our life finds itself, our heart, our whole selves, and who is with us, who is entrusted to us.

But without forgetting that the very thirst that we have in our heart is the meaning of our life, because it is thirst for God, thirst for fulfillment, for ultimate and total wholeness. There is nothing that binds me to the end of life, that is a relationship with the end, more than the thirst I feel, which lies in me, in my heart, as it were closed in, but which seems to wake back up and wake back up time and again, by surprise, like that morning for me in Brazil, when the surprise of my soul's thirst for God woke me up.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, dies after having said two last words: "I thirst!" and "It is finished!" (Jn 19:28, 30). Thirst and fulfillment, the thirst that is fulfillment. Jesus, in the end, was only thirst, his soul was only thirst, he had only thirst, only thirst to love, only thirst for love, only thirst for God. The dying God thirsted for the living God. He feels our thirst, our souls' thirst, our thirst for Him. In Him is all our thirst for Him. And in this thirst his whole mission and whole life was fulfilled.

The thirst for the living God that surprises us in our soul reveals to us that the meaning of life is that God be for us the goal of all, that the Father be the goal of all, that Christ be the goal of all, of every instant. The thirst for God is this stretching toward the end of life that burns in the present, in every instant of life. And everything comes to nourish this thirst, even what disturbs us, even what distracts us, even the weariness that we carry on our backs, and which often becomes even more acute when we stop for silence, for reading and meditation, for prayer. The thirst for the Face of God, of the living God, is nourished by all, because all longs for the end, for a fulfillment, and the more imperfect is what feels longing, the more incomplete it is, the more it longs. The problem is not the quality of the thirst, but the water with which we pretend to satisfy it. And so, yes, it is important to stop ourselves, to tell ourselves and tell God: it is for You that I thirst, and no other, even if I quench myself with a thousand other things, "my soul thirsts for **You**; my flesh faints for **You**, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water!" (Ps 62:2).

We need moments, points of awareness, instants of memory, in which we recognize that the thirst that troubles us morning and evening, even if we distract ourselves from it with sufficient flippancy (it is enough to think of the pious chats of the Samaritan woman when Jesus speaks to her of her true thirst), that our thirst is thirst for "the living God," that is, of a present God, who has a Face toward which we can come close: "When shall I come and see the face of God?" (Ps 41:3).