

8. At the ground of hope

When Jesus was crucified, a scene played out around him that reproduced the original choice to which freedom is called, between the presumption of grasping to oneself the fruit of the tree and that of waiting for it to be granted. It is the scene of the two thieves described by Luke:

“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” (Lk 23:39–43)

The thief who insults Jesus is the figure of the man who wants to grasp for himself what God grants without measure. He is basically like Lucifer who, being an angel created to be transparent to the light and love of God, and wanting to be himself the source of this light and this love, falls into the darkness of envy and hatred. The good thief, on the other hand, does not want to grasp anything, does not stretch out his hand toward the Fruit of life and of true wisdom that hangs ripe from the tree of the Cross. He desires it, he has a vital need for it and begs for the gift of it, without imposing times or circumstances. He entrusts himself wholly to the King of love. And in this moment, it as if Jesus, the eternal Word of God, had remembered when he went in the beginning to seek Adam in the earthly paradise without finding welcome. In the repentant thief, it is as if God rediscovered Adam, and then embraces him and takes him with him into Paradise.

When we confuse hope with immediate expectations, the true problem is not the limitedness of the latter, because often they concern plainly necessary needs for our human life. It is just and vital to have appetite and thirst for food and drink that allow us to live, and even more to desire the affections and friendships that make our existence human.

The problem is when the anticipations supplant hope in God, when the immediate expectations fill the whole space of the heart’s desire, of our need, and then hope is no longer necessary there. But this means that God is no longer necessary. I can address my expectations to myself, to others, basically to our strengths, to what we already have, or what others have. Hope is essentially directed toward God, toward what God alone can give. And we have seen in the school of St. Benedict, which is the school of the Biblical and Christian tradition, that the human being is made for hoping for two essential things from God: life and happiness, or, if we want, the happy life, the eternal life that is the only thing that assures us eternal happiness.

But where, in what condition, in what experience, does hope reveal itself as absolutely necessary? It is important to be aware of it, because this is how we discover the depths to which Christ descends to save mankind.

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:9–10).

If Christ had not descended, his ascension, his being the fullness of all things, would not do us much good. But it is precisely his descent, his self-abasement, that enable him to be the fullness of everything, including of the human condition fallen in sin and in death, which He came to lift back up.

Up to what point does Christ descend to seek man? The faith professed in the Creed teaches us that he descended to the netherworld. He went down to seek Adam, but in Adam we are invited to recognize the whole human condition after sin. If it were not so, the descent of Christ to the netherworld would not concern us. But Christ did descend toward Adam, toward our human condition, to seek it not only where it is hiding, like Adam and Eve among the shrubs of the garden, but where humanity, hiding itself from God, feels itself desperately abandoned.

To get the importance and profundity of Christian hope, then, it is necessary to consider, with truth, our experience of abandonment. Often, in fact, we think that the hope in us is taken for granted, that it is taken for granted and easy to have hope. Often we do not want to admit that we are desperate, that certain personal and communal situations are desperate. It is basically a Pharisaic attitude, which takes refuge in voluntaristic affirmations of hope in order not to fail to live up to our religious and moral convictions. As if for us Christians, and especially us religious, monks and nuns, priests and engaged laity, hope were a professional duty, included in our "employment contract." An old doctor whom I used to ask how his health was would always answer me, "I say I'm doing fine in order not to offend my profession!"

The problem is that often the convictions that we affirm no longer rest on experience, on reality, but on themselves. So that in defending them, too, since there is nothing they are really founded on, they themselves transform into an argument for which to believe and act, for which to fight, perhaps even to fanaticism. Fanaticism is a struggle in which one no longer fights in defense of or to affirm a reality, the truth of a reality, but to defend and affirm the weapons with which one fights for it. Like the wars of today, which ultimately are waged for no reason but to promote and defend the sale and use of arms. One fights for the weapons themselves, war is waged for the sake of war.

So to recognize that in reality we are lacking in hope, that we are basically desperate, it is necessary to accept getting disarmed, disarmed of our false hopes, of the false promises on which we rely and the false convictions that we affirm.