

14. The God who awaits

With sin, however, another mystery begins, or rather totally manifests itself. When man betrays awaiting God, God's hope in his regard, then God sets about looking for and awaiting man. God, that is, manifests his mercy, reveals that his love for us is mercy.

What does the Father in the parable of the prodigal son do in Lk 15:11–32? He waits! Just as the son has left for perdition or death, the father sets about waiting for him immediately, hoping that he returns: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found!" (Lk 15:24). In the figure of this father who awaits his son, Jesus reveals to us an extraordinary mystery: he reveals to us that when the love of God is revealed as mercy, it is as if the eternal God had left eternity to become expectation in time, seeking in time, patience in time. God who was the eternal Being who was to be awaited becomes for our sake the eternal Being who awaits. This is the mystery of Jesus Christ. The Eternal enters into time to the point of taking upon himself all the consequences of man's sin: effort, pain, and death. And for man's time, for human time, this is what restores meaning, beauty, the intensity and fulness of waiting for God, of waiting for the Bridegroom who comes, the beauty and intensity of hope. The Eternal comes into time as the Bridegroom, which means he comes as He to whom we are invited to unite ourselves intimately and for ever in order to live our life with joy and fruitfulness. When two spouses love each other, the expectation and communion between them becomes a greater reality than the effort, pain, and death which characterize earthly life.

What did Jesus, the Son of God, do during the thirty years at Nazareth? He too waited, he lived out a time of expectation, without haste, with obedience. "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come," Jesus says to his mother during the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:4). With this saying, which almost seems to escape from him in a moment of irritation, Christ gives away instead the meaning of the whole time he patiently spent hidden at Nazareth: for thirty years he waited for his hour, the hour of his mission, the hour desired by the Father, the hour that gives meaning to time, to the effort, pain, and death of human time.

When we hurry, when we want everything right away, the problem is not that we do not have enough time: the problem is that we do not wait for God, that from what we are living, doing, encountering, we do not await anything but that thing there, that outcome there, that particular pleasure, that immediate satisfaction. We do not wait for the infinite, the eternal, we do not wait for God. We suffocate time because we do not breathe in the expectation for God, the hope for God.

Before dying, the father of monks, St. Anthony the Abbot, said to his disciples: "Always breathe Christ!" (St. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 91.3). What great love he had for his spiritual children, that he would leave them for their inheritance not some goods, not some riches, not some power, but the awareness of a need, of a vital poverty, of a radical weakness: needing Christ like we need air to live!

“Always breath Christ!” means that, in the immediate need that we all have, like the need for oxygen, we are granted the opportunity to express and incarnate our awaiting the encounter with the Eternal who wants to unite himself to us. It is as if St. Antony had said to his disciples that when we need to breathe air too, it is Christ that we need, that is, every human need is a real, concrete symbol of our need for the Lord, of our awaiting Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom of life.

It’s like he said: when you are lacking air, or when you are hungry or thirsty, or when you are lacking health, or the company and love of your neighbor, when you are lacking affection, know that it is of Christ that you have and will always have need, it is He who is truly and deeply missing to the human heart. This does not mean that we should not breathe, that we should not eat and drink, that we should not prize our health, affection, and friendship. By making himself man, Jesus loved all this, he enjoyed all this. But he always lived everything that is human as a way of relating with the Father, as a concrete occasion to think of the Father, to love the Father, to ask the Father for everything, to praise the Father with gratitude for everything.

Waiting for God does not mortify this taste for life. On the contrary: it is exactly what makes it possible. When we only expect the immediate from life, what we can grab ourselves without putting our heart to work in desiring the infinite, we immediately experience disappointment, the fruit we have snatched and hold in hand immediately disappoints us, rots, makes us more empty and sad. Instead, we are granted to experience, with wonder, that the more we desire and await God within every corner of life, the more we are granted to taste life in every moment, in every detail, like Jesus who admired each little flower, each child that played on the street, every gesture of human labor.

Waiting for God fills time up, fills up the moment, like when the wind stretches and powerfully puffs up the sail that allows the boat to move, to have a direction, a dynamism that challenges the waves of the sea. But the wind puffs up the sail because it blows further than the point where it finds the boat, because it blows toward an infinite space. Or the water of a stream that moves the wheel and thus the grindstone of the mill: it does so because it runs toward the sea. Stagnant water does not have the energy to move the mill-wheel. Rather, it’s the water that runs toward the sea that does. And the energy is exactly in that destination, in that decided directedness toward the infinite space of the sea.

It’s the same in our life: the more we are stretched toward desiring God, toward awaiting God, toward hoping in Him, the more each little movement, each step of which human existence is composed finds itself animated by an energy, by a vitality that is otherwise impossible, that astonishes, because it is in fact a miracle, a work of God who passes mysteriously through our little daily life.

Thus we understand that God’s great miracle in creating man is our heart, made to desire and love the Creator. The great miracle of God is our freedom made to await and desire God because God awaits and desires it first, eternally.