

22. The encounter that fulfills the hope in the promise

The Book of Revelation speaks of Christ as “He who is, who was, and who is to come” (Rev 1:8). That Christ is he who is and who was could also concern just Himself. God is in himself; it can always be simply for himself. But the fact that he *comes* is for us; that He comes is in order to meet each of us, it is a “coming after us,” it is an offer made to us, an event that challenges our freedom, our freedom of attending to him, our freedom of welcoming him and following him.

Jesus comes and draws us; he gives himself to us and arouses in us the desire to give ourselves to Him. He comes, is incarnate, descends all the way to the manger of Bethlehem, all the way to the tomb, all the way to the underworld, to draw us to him who is incarnate, him who is born, him who is present, him who is crucified, him who is risen. And the Risen One continues this “game”: he comes and disappears, he comes and draws us to the Father. Like when he encounters Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection: “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”’” (Jn 20:16–17). First he reaches her by appearing to her as a lowly gardener, and then he tells her not to cling to him because he wants to draw her and all the disciples to the Father.

The mercy of God is all in his coming to us to draw us to Himself. Taking account of this, and playing along with this “game,” transforms one’s whole life, it lights up in it the light of God’s beauty which transfigures all things, even the most wretched and ugly things of our humanity. Our whole life becomes a precious space shared with all where Christ comes to take us with himself to return to the Father.

During his trial before King Agrippa, St. Paul says that the reason for the persecution he is undergoing is the hope in the promise made by God to Israel: “And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:6–8).

But after these words, instead of continuing to argue in a rabbinic mode about these topics to which he knows his audience is sensitive, Paul forgets to defend himself and sets about bearing witness to his encounter with Jesus, an encounter that happened precisely when he was in a bitter and violent fight against Him and his disciples. Paul starts giving the reason for his hope by proclaiming the Lord whom he met on the road to Damascus. Christ fulfills the hope in the promise made by God to the fathers and for which all of Israel is awaiting fulfillment. But also, Christ fulfills all mankind’s and the whole universe’s expectation of salvation and of eternal life, for, as Paul writes to the Romans, “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God (...) in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-21).

The only argument to prove that the hope of Israel and of all mankind is fulfilled in Jesus is, then, the encounter with Him, his word: “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me’” (Acts 26:14–18).

This page illustrates what it means to be overwhelmed by the hope of Christ. Saul falls to the ground, along with all his companions. But he was already on the ground, he was already sunk in a life without hope. He was prisoner of hatred and death, without the possibility of getting out, because he was convinced of being just, holy, faithful, of being God’s servant. To get out of fanaticism it is necessary to come upon something that overwhelms, that knocks one to the ground. And, indeed, Jesus knocks Saul to the ground. With what force? The light of heaven, his light, the light of his face, more splendid than the sun. It is a light that surrounds them and makes Saul blind, sinking him into darkness. But even into the darkness Saul had already fallen before that moment. He was blind, incapable of seeing Christ.

From that moment Saul, taken by the hand, received by the community of Damascus, by the timid disciple Ananias, has an experience that will mark his whole life and mission: the experience that the only hope is the risen Christ, that he alone lifts us up from the dust, from the tomb, only he frees us from the darkness, from sin, from hatred, from despair. When the crucified Jesus descended into the darkness of abandonment and death, he did it to reach the man, Adam, of whom Saul is like an essential representative.

Paul will spend his life remembering this experience, the only really precious one, more precious than the mystical experiences he will have, like that of being “caught up into paradise” and hearing “things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor 12:4), hence receiving spiritual graces and powers beyond measure. These will not be the experiences that make him a witness and prophet, burning with charity for all, but rather the experience that only Christ saves us from nothingness.