



## Prophetic Testimony for Today's Generation

‘There is nothing new under the sun.’ This affirmation of Qohelet 1:9 may seem excessive, but in reality it is of considerable actuality. Wanting to dwell a little on prophecy and on the theme entrusted to me, ‘prophetic witness for today's generation,’ we can immediately realize that the appeal and testimony of biblical prophets are still necessary and urgent nowadays, in a situation that presents aspects and problems similar to those that the biblical prophets have had to face.

To reflect on this, I would particularly like to refer to a prophetic figure that is particularly significant for you, and that in some way represents the beginning of biblical prophecy, the prophet Elijah.

I will articulate my speech in four points, highlighting some elements that may be useful for reflection.

### 1. Syncretism

The time of Elijah – we are in the ninth century, in the Northern Kingdom – is marked by a strong spiritual and religious confusion within Israel; the people allowed themselves to be contaminated by pagan cults and under the reign of Ahab, who had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, Baalism had also officially entered the kingdom of Israel, without supplanting the Lord, but coexisting with the cult of the true God, in an extreme syncretism that Elijah comes to denounce.

The situation was extremely serious, also because Baal exercised a strong fascination on the population, of an essentially agricultural culture; Baal was in fact the god of rain, an essential element in a tendentially desert land, and therefore presided over the fertility of the fields and the fertility of the livestock. Of him it was said that he had fought with death and had at first been defeated, and then returned to live and, by facing death again, this time he had emerged victorious. Such a story has obvious relationships with the agricultural cycle: with the seed that dies and returns to live as an head of grain; and with the alternation of the seasons, with the earth felled by drought and then returned to live in the rain.

With Baal, Israel suffers the temptation of a tame and understandable god, within the reach of man, in open contrast with the Lord, God of the fathers, with his invisibility and mystery, never predictable, whose ways are not those of men ( cf. Is 55:8-9) and



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from whom all is received as a gift but therefore on whom one is always waiting, in the uncertainty of one who cannot obtain what one wants by giving sacrifices in exchange, as was instead possible with the idol. Faith is sometimes tiring, it requires trust, the ability to wait, to see beyond appearances, to hope against all hope; Baal is a god, in this sense, more restful, less demanding, more accessible.

We, people of our time, also know this temptation. And while continuing to call ourselves Christians, we seek certainties and an illusion of salvation in things and presumed values different from God. Money, success, health and beauty have become absolute realities, indispensable, to which we tend in every way. Baal is now placed next to the Lord, the search for self alongside the search for God, the veneration of money and economic and political power alongside the veneration of saints and traditional acts of devotion. Even today, as in the days of Elijah, the voice of the prophet is therefore necessary to reveal hypocrisy and to close heaven in order to convince the world that life can only come from God.

It is thus that the mission of Elijah begins, whose task is to bring out the truth and help the people to become aware, so as to bring them to conversion. His effective word of prophet closes the sky, and he announces: ‘As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, during these years there shall be no dew or rain except at my word’ (1 Kings 17:1). If Israel awaited the rain from Baal, it will now know that it is instead the Lord who commands the heavens through the word of his envoy.

A time of suffering and death is prepared for the people. Without rain, there is no longer the possibility of harvesting, and even the denial of dew confirms the total drought. The mysterious gift of dew, which moistens the ground even when it is not the time of the rains, is eliminated, opening up a terrifying prospect of death for men and cattle. A vision that seems to evoke David's curse on the mountains of Gilboa, on which Saul and his son Jonathan had perished in battle:

‘O mountains of Gilboa,  
upon you be neither dew nor rain,  
nor surging from the deeps!  
Defiled there the warriors’ shields,  
the shield of Saul...’ (2Sam 1:21)

With these words, David gives voice to his pain and horror in the face of the tragedy of defeat and the death of the anointed one of the Lord and of his beloved friend; the end of rain and dew is the definitive sign of a curse (cf. Deut. 28:23-24), and manifests and expresses the unacceptability of what has happened.



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Similarly, at the time of Elijah, the closing of the heavens reveals the gravity of the situation; the sin of the people has now reached its peak, creating a reality of death that now becomes visible. The drought prophesied and wanted by Elia is both a complaint and a punishment; but both are for conversion and salvation.

This is because the task of the prophet is to lead to reconciliation with God. But to let oneself be forgiven and reconciled, to let oneself be saved, one must be aware of needing it. Forgiveness is effective only if the offender accepts it; the sinner must recognize himself as such, to become aware and recognize the gravity of the evil he is committing and to wish to be freed from it. This is what the prophets are for, the drought decreed by Elijah serves for this.

We are within a process present in Sacred Scripture and referred to as *rîb*, i.e., a legal dispute, in which those who have been wronged turn to the guilty party directly, without going through the mediation and arbitration of a third party, and, setting him before his truth, help him to become aware of his evil so that, recognizing it, he can free himself from it and let himself be forgiven. The purpose of the *rîb* is, therefore, reconciliation, and supposes, on the part of those who have been injured in their rights, a will to overcome all rancor and any desire for revenge, and instead, to seek the good of the other by helping him to get out of the deadly circle of his evil. Somehow, we can say that those who undertake the *rîb* against those who are their enemies have actually already forgiven them.

Unlike judgment, in which one turns to a judge asking for a conviction of the guilty and possible compensation, in *rîb* there is no condemnation; on the contrary, it is precisely avoided with the attempt to have the guilty recede from his own evil conduct. There is no condemnation, but there is a denunciation of evil as evil, but as an evil already forgiven, already overcome, if the culprit accepts the offer that comes from a greater good, that desires only reconciliation.

In this way, justice is fully restored, because evil is revealed in its reality, the victim is recognized in his rights, and the unjust, allowing himself be converted, becomes right; injustice is no longer there, recovered and transformed by forgiveness.

This is what God does with regard to the sinner; thus the prophets do in the name of God; thus, Jesus does in his salvific work, bringing everything to fulfillment. He is the true and definitive prophet, the mediator of the Father's mercy, who helps humanity to become aware of their sin and their need for forgiveness. All of his activity, preaching, signs, parables and miracles, all must contribute to the realization of the Father's plan of salvation. His "accusation" is that of the *rîb*, an offer of forgiveness that takes away sin, and frees humanity forever.



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And when he himself becomes accused, but in the tribunal, where the accusation is not for salvation, but to provoke a condemnation, Jesus, falsely accused, enters into silence (cf. in particular Mt 26:62-63; 27:12-14; Mk 14:60-61; 15:4-5; Lk 23:9; Jn 19:9-10). Since responding to the accusations would have required demonstrating its falsity, thus provoking the condemnation of false witnesses, Jesus is, therefore, silent. He answers only to testify to his own messianic truth (cf. Mt 26:63-64; Mk 14:61-62; Lk 22:67-70), but then lets the sentence fall on him, he accepts being declared guilty and condemned to die so that the accusers might be saved.

‘This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father’: these are the words that Jesus speaks in Jn 10:17-18, presenting himself as a good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. In extreme and total freedom, he enters death by transforming it into a gift of life. And it is a gift for everyone, since the salvific scope of its historical event goes far beyond the time and space in which it takes place, to invade every time and every space, and become an offering of salvation for all people of every time and place.

In the paschal mystery, divine mercy finds its maximum expression and effectiveness. Jesus becomes a victim of every accusation, of every desire for evil, of every violence, to be able to forgive them precisely as a victim, and thus free all people. Before those who want to kill him, he says: no, it is I who give my life for you. His death changes the sign: no one can take his life; it is he who gives it in an act of love so great and definitive as to open, for all those who want it, the way of salvation and forgiveness. This is the mystery to which believers are called to testify. And this is the ‘prophetic witness for today’s generation’ on which your vocation questions and interrogates you today. Responding to the need of the ‘present generation’ means being witnesses today of the eternal mercy of the Father, at the service of a love that knows how to transform death into life, and sin into a gift of grace.

And this is also how, in embryo, Elijah lives and realizes his mission. Drought is its appeal to the hearts of the Israelites to convert, to experience how “it hurts to do evil” and let themselves be led to the path of conversion, abandoning the hypocrisy of a syncretism that leads to falsehood. Forgetting himself, he puts himself at the service of God’s forgiveness, and becomes an intercessor and a mediator of mercy even in the harshness of a denunciation of the evil that ends up closing the heavens.

We too, today as the Church, are called to bear witness to this and live it in the various situations of our reality. We are called to resolutely make a choice between God and Baal, to decide on what values our existence really is based, what really feeds the spirit



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of our religious communities, and then to unmask the lie of the world with its idols, but in the love of those who bring forgiveness, of those who look with merciful eyes, of those who do not judge, but place themselves alongside people to walk with them in the search for truth.

This, however, is a difficult journey. And the story of the prophets, and of Jesus, shows it to us. The service of mercy leads to loneliness and persecution.

## **2. Solitude and persecution**

The story of Elijah, as for every prophet, is marked by moments of crisis and serious difficulty. In his struggle against Baal, after the victory of Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18), when the people finally seem to understand and acknowledge their mistake, allowing the rain to return, the prophet experiences fear. The credibility of the idol had been destroyed, but the king, and above all his wife Jezebel, continued to maintain power, and for Elijah, a death sentence was decreed. If with the rain the Lord of Israel manifested Himself in his truth and power, proving Himself to be the ruler of heaven, the question now arises as to who governs history; and it seems that it is the king who can do it, deciding the elimination of that prophetic voice that was put at the service of God.

It is the fate of the prophet, the bearer of an announcement of salvation which must, however, pass through the inconvenient denunciation of sin. His mission is well summarized in the words that the Lord addresses to Jeremiah when sending him to prophesy against Jerusalem:

‘Today I appoint you  
over nations and over kingdoms,  
To uproot and to tear down,  
to destroy and to demolish,  
to build and to plant’ (Jer 1: 10).

In this divine announcement, we have four negative verbs and only two positive ones. The inequality is significant, and indicates the seriousness of the evil that conditions the path of salvation. In those verbs, all the drama that marks the prophetic mission is condensed, because those to whom the prophet is sent are prisoners of a deception that must be demolished so that the truth can be rebuilt and opened to salvation. There is no mercy without truth and therefore without judgment; evil must be revealed and judged, and thus uprooted and destroyed. Only then will it be possible to plant the new seed of truth and make a new reality of good grow.



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An offer of forgiveness and grace that God makes to a world in need of truth, a powerful bearer of an effective Word, the prophet is also defenseless and fragile, because he is the repository of a message that is offered in meekness and that people can refuse, arriving also to silence the uncomfortable messenger with persecution and death.

This is what Jezebel decided, thus forcing Elijah to flee, moved by fear. The prophet goes to the desert and sets out, alone, in that place of death. It is in order to try to save his life, but wishing to die: ‘Enough, LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors’ (1 Kings 19: 4). These words are very significant: they express all the disillusionment, the unbearable situation. With this sentence Elia is saying that no one could resist, that nobody can do it, that even his mission seems to be over. They are words of a lonely man, overcome by the painful perception of an unsustainable abandonment; an abandonment that does not seem to come only from men, but also from God. The prophet feels the emptiness around him, and confronts the apparent futility of his work, the uselessness of so much fighting. Everything seems to have been erased and the only reality he is able to perceive is the threat of condemnation hanging over him. Elijah declares himself defeated, and lets himself go to sleep, in a sort of anticipation of death.

It is the painful experience of failure, that bitterness that so often accompanies our missions. The service of salvation, an almost always exhilarating experience at its beginning, soon turns into questions without answers. We are alone; faith makes us go along paths different from those of others; we proceed against the current; we refer to values that are not common. And if this can help to find the strength to fight, then it can lead to a tiredness very close to giving up. The others do not listen to us, the initiatives fail to hold interest, the proposals clash with indifference. It is the effort of pastoral work, and above all that of holding out in faith, of believing that the seed must die to bear fruit and that we will not see it; it is the feeling of powerlessness that accompanies the need to let the Lord work, without pretending to manage our project, according to our criteria.

Here is the temptation of sleep, of renunciation; of ‘Enough ... I am no better than my fathers.’ It is here that God intervenes with his angel who orders us: “Get up and eat” (1 Kings 19:5; see also v. 7). And with Elijah, we discover the hearth cake cooked on the stone; while we wanted to give up, someone continued to take care of our life, He never abandoned us, but took care of us, cooking for us the bread that sets us back on the road.

Living in the service of God and His salvation means living in fidelity by responding to this faithfulness of God. And as prophets, we must become witnesses of divine



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fidelity. Our time needs to believe in Him who does not abandon his friends, never leaves us alone. The situation today is too often made up of bitter experiences of betrayals, of misplaced trust; in the face of prevailing violence, of abuses, of the rejection of those who are different, we all need to go back to believing in goodness, friendship, fraternity. The prophetic testimony then arises as a bulwark against the temptation of sleep and rejection.

But we need to remain faithful. And every time this fidelity asks us to return to the roots of our mission, to then actualize them in individual situations, day after day. To do this requires an opening of the heart and a great capacity for listening; first of all, listening to the Word of God.

### **3. Listening to the Word of God**

The Word of God represents the central and indispensable point of reference for the believer, and even more for those who live in a religious community. It asks for a listening made of trust, of adoring silence, of obedience; it is a listening done with the heart, which welcomes and meditates and translates into life what the Word reveals and teaches.

As is known, in the biblical world, the heart is considered the fundamental organ of existence, not only from a physical point of view, but also from a mental and spiritual one. It is, in fact, the seat of many feelings, of decision-making capacity, of knowledge and of will. A listening made with the heart, therefore, implies a strong personal involvement, an authentic openness of the mind, a total willingness to let oneself be changed and transformed by what one listens to. This requires attention, silence, respectful love, and the conviction that what the other has to tell us is fundamental for our life, a precious treasure to be carefully guarded. And to listen in this way means also to put into practice what has been understood, to obey what is revealed. Listening and obedience are practically synonymous, and in fact, linguistically, the act of listening and that of obedience in Hebrew are indicated with the same verb.

A classic reference text concerning all this is the well-known Shema Yisrael ('Listen, Israel'), which we find in the book of Deuteronomy. The text reads:

'Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength. Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them



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be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates' (Dt 6: 4-9).

We are on the threshold of the promised land, after the long and tiring journey in the desert, which taught the people to live in faith, in freedom, and in respect for the truth. And now, Moses, who also arrived at the end of his journey, instructs Israel to prepare themselves for life in the promised land, where a totally new situation awaits them: no more wandering in the desert in the precariousness of the tents, but the stability of a house in a habitable land; no longer the manna, gift of heaven to wait every day in trust and also in uncertainty, but the fields to plow and sow, and land to cultivate and from which to pick the fruits; no longer the material obedience to the indications received (such as collecting the manna, when to move and when to stop, etc.), but the assumption of one's responsibilities in a different obedience, made mature, which comes from within: obedience of the heart.

And Moses prepares the people for this passage; he instructs them and warns them, and tells them: 'Listen.' Listening is what establishes the life of faith.

What Israel has to listen to is the fundamental truth on which to base one's existence: the Lord is God and He is one, and He asks for a unique, irreplaceable relationship, an unconditional adherence that manifests itself and takes shape in love and obedience to the His law. The absolute of God asks for an absolute love, and asks for the recognition of the Lord as the only source of life and blessing.

Therefore, obedience to the divine words, to the law and to the whole revelation of God is connected to love: words to keep in the heart, to always remember our belonging to the Lord and our destiny of holiness; words that must be the object of our thinking in every moment, always and everywhere, and the object of teaching to be given to children, as to what is most precious; words never to be forgotten, written on the doors, on the forehead and on the hands, but above all, on the heart, to witness to the greatness of God's goodness and His desire for life.

It is significant that the text of the Shema is preceded by the phrase: 'Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe [the laws], that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly; for the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you a land flowing with milk and honey'(v. 3). And later, in the same chapter we read: 'The LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes in fear of the LORD, our God, that we may always have as good a life as we have today' (v. 24). Listening to and obeying the Word leads to life, because the words of God are words of life and make the life of God live. And those words nourish by the prophet, a man of listening; 'Speak, Lord,



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your servant is listening' (1 Sam 3: 9-10): thus the young Samuel opens himself to his reality as a prophet and mediator of life.

A reference figure of great importance regarding all this, for every believer and, I believe, above all for the Carmelites, is the figure of Mary, a figure of listening without reservations, in total availability and with all its implications.

A particularly significant text to refer to can be Lk 11:28. Jesus is preaching in response to the provocations of some who had witnessed the demise of a devil and accused him. And 'while he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed." He replied, "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it".' A saying that recalls the other in chapter 8 on the true relatives of Jesus: "He was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you." He said to them in reply, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it"' (8: 20-21).

All the meaning of true listening is enclosed here: those who 'listen to the word of God and keep it' and 'put it into practice' are the true relatives of Jesus and are the truly blessed. Keeping and doing: these are the two poles that follow listening: the Word is really listened to (not simply heard) to the extent that it is kept in the heart, that is, rethought, meditated, loved and then done, translated into actions and into life.

A daughter of Abraham and Moses, Mary lived within this tradition and this spirituality of listening, and obeyed the Shema, an obedient and faithful listener of the word of the Lord. And Jesus now bears witness to her. In front of the admired woman who, to praise her and to proclaim her greatness, proclaims his mother blessed, he replies that Mary is so blessed, but because she listened to the word of God and kept it, that is, she meditated on it and put it into practice.

#### **4. Living in fidelity**

Mary, therefore, shows us the way; but putting into practice and living the Word requires a profound understanding of its meaning so that it can then be incarnated in various situations. Fidelity to the Word of God, and to the particular vocation that the Lord gives to each of us, goes through the travail of an appropriation of what we are told, an interiorization that can then transform specific individual concretizations according to the different situations in which we find ourselves living. The Word is one, but the forms that fidelity to it must take on are as many as the different contingencies of our life.



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And this is typical of the prophet, who interprets events and actualizes the meaning of the Law. But it is also a sapiential dimension, a necessary manifestation of listening to divine wisdom.

In fact, to be able to make this actualization one must have a good understanding of the meaning of things and thus find an adequate response to the changes that must be faced. A very significant example is offered to us by the figure of the pious Tobit, from the book of Tobit. Tobit, a Jew from the tribe of Naphtali, was a just man and faithful to the law of the Lord. He lived in the northern kingdom, separated therefore from Jerusalem, in a situation of contamination with pagan cults. Here too, as in the time of Elijah, syncretism had entered the religious mentality of the people, and the distance from the temple of Jerusalem had favored the proliferation of decentralized sanctuaries that absorbed the customs and beliefs of the surrounding pagan peoples. But Tobit continues to live in fidelity, making pilgrimages to the temple every year as was prescribed in the law and faith of the fathers; and in the temple, in fidelity and obedience, he offered the first fruits and tithes for the Levites and every three years for the widows, orphans and foreigners (cf. Deut. 14). Tobit's fidelity to God was lived in completeness, both in the relationship with the Lord and towards his brothers, according to the perspective of the two tablets of the Law. But when then the exile in Assyria arrives, Tobit must change the ways of his fidelity; the temple is no longer reachable, the offering of the first fruits is no longer possible. Tobit must adapt to a new reality and find ways to continue to live the same values as before, but now in a different way; the forms of his relationship to God change, but translating the same meaning in a new way.

And thus, while his compatriots are being contaminated by the pagan world in which they are now forced to live, Tobit maintains his identity as a Jew by refusing to eat pagan food. There is no longer the Temple and the possibility of pilgrimage, yet Tobit continues to say that he belongs to the Lord of Israel by obeying the law of pure and impure foods, thus symbolically reaffirming his own diversity from the Gentiles and professing, through obedience to that law, that life can only come from obedience to God and from the relationship with Him. And if it is no longer possible to offer the tithes and the first fruits that were used for the poor, Tobit transforms them into alms, giving life to a new form of justice and of distribution of wealth. And finally, he finds another form of fidelity to his vocation as a Jew: despite the prohibitions, he buries his dead compatriots, moved by a piety that goes beyond death, and bringing back the brothers, who had allowed themselves to be diverted, within the people, through the symbolic act of burial that reunited them with these fathers who were received in the bosom of the same land, making them participants in the divine mercy that overcomes death.



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Thus one lives fidelity, and to this you are called: in an obedience that knows how to go beyond the fulfillment and the pure formal and external conformity of the precept or rule, to open up to an interior obedience, awesome and filial, which internalizes and assumes the command as its own, which makes the word it hears its own, in a convergence of will that will find its most perfect fulfillment in the Son.

Obedient listening that goes through the ordeal of 'keeping' and 'doing', the command opens the believer to obedience that questions the meaning of the letter, understands its implications, confronts the reality of the moment and, today of its own existence, it finds the path of a fully responsible and supremely free actualization, of a true obedience of the spirit and in the spirit.

And then you become 'blessed', even more than having borne Jesus in the womb: blessed with that beatitude that God shares with us by sharing with us his Word, blessed like Mary for having listened to the Word of God and having kept it, relatives of Jesus for having listened to it and put it into practice.

And then it will also be possible to recognize the presence of God in the new signs of his revelation and to help the brothers and sisters of our generation, as true prophets, to recognize His face and listen to His voice. No longer the fire, the earthquake, the impetuous wind of the Sinai theophany; in the contemplative and prayerful listening of the divine Word, we are called to listen in silence and recognize the Lord, with Elijah, in a 'voice of subtle silence' (1 Kings 19:12). And the 'present generation' will have found its 'prophetic witness'.

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