Faithfulness and time

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“Oh, that today you would hear his voice” (Psalm 95:7): in the Bible, it is Israel’s covenant with God that gives time its meaning. The ‘existential’ time in which the people of God lives is granted to them through the *davar* (word-event) of the Lord and through their own obedience to this word. In the Bible, time is always tied to the radically historical nature of human existence, and to the fact that each of us is created by God with the capacity to choose today between life and death, the blessing and the curse. History itself is directed toward a *télos* (goal) revealed through the actions of God, who manifests himself in humanity’s progress and regressions. Our history is a story of salvation because God continues to call humanity to walk toward the light, toward the goal of the Kingdom, and because he continues to inspire in us the longing for *shalom*, which is both God’s gift and the highest achievement of human faithfulness. We find this Biblical understanding of time developed further in the New Testament: in the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) God sends his Son, born of a woman, and the life and passion-death-resurrection of Jesus are single historical events that take place in a specific moment of history and mark the beginning of the ‘last days,’ a time in which we await Jesus’ return in glory, the coming of the Kingdom, and the renewal of the entire cosmos.

With the first coming of Jesus we witness the beginning of a *kairós*, a ‘time of favor’ that defines all of time from that moment onward. “This is the time of fulfillment,” (Mark 1:15) Jesus announces as he begins his ministry: it is time to repent and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15, Matthew 4:17), because the time of fulfillment has begun. This means that we are asked to use time well: the time of favor is a reality in Jesus Christ! The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus are not simply past events; they are the reality of the present, and our concrete today is flooded in the light of salvation. Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:2)! The Christian’s first attitude with regard to time, then, is that of recognizing in his or her own ‘today’ the ‘today’ of God. As we listen to and obey the Word that resounds today, our relationship with time - in Greek mythology, the tyrant Chronos who devours his children - is transformed and takes on specific characteristics: we discover that we need to interpret the present time (cf. Luke 12:56) and “judge the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3) in order to recognize the time of our visitation by God (Luke 19:44). We know that our time is in God’s hands: “I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:15-16).

This is our fundamental attitude: our days do not belong to us; they are not our property. Time belongs to God, and for this reason the Psalmist says to God, “Lord, let me know my end, the number of my days” (Psalm 39:5), and asks, “Teach us to count our days...that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Psalm 90:12). Our wisdom consists in knowing how to count our days and recognize them as a time of favor, as God’s today that breaks into our own today. Christians are asked to “be vigilant at all times and pray” (Luke 21:36) because they are involved in a struggle against idolatry in which the idol, the tyrant who seeks to dominate and enslave, is alienated time. According to Paul, Christians should try to take full advantage of the time they have available, and use it for doing good (cf. Galatians 6:10). They are called, above all, to use their wisdom to save, set free and redeem time (cf. Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5). All of this derives from the Christian experience of time as struggle, trial, and suffering. Even after the victory of Christ and the communication of the energies of the resurrection to Christians, the influence of the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4) is still present in the world, and time remains a time of exile and pilgrimage (cf. 1 Peter 1:17) in which Christians await the eschatological reality in which God will be all in all (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Today, in a time in which many tend to limit their attention to what is current and immediate and no longer have the courage to speak about perseverance, let alone eternity, Christians know - and repeat tirelessly - that time opens into eternity and eternal life, into a time filled by God alone. This is the goal toward which all time is directed, and in it “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8; cf. Revelation 1:18). The télos of our lives is eternal life, and our days are an expression of our longing for the coming of God. If this is the authentic dimension of time for the Christian, we can understand the full weight of these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Is not the loss of our moral memory the reason behind the dissolving of all personal ties - love, marriage, friendship, faithfulness? Nothing lasts, nothing takes root. Everything is short-term, everything is temporary. But great things such as justice, truth, beauty and in general all great accomplishments demand time, stability, and 'memory,' or they degenerate. Someone who is not willing to bear responsibility for a past and give form to a future is someone who is 'memoryless,' and I do not know how such a person can be confronted, shaken, or made to reflect."

Written more than fifty years ago, these words are still very relevant in the way they address the issues of faithfulness and perseverance. These realities are rare today, and often we no longer know how to define the words themselves - at times, they are even felt to be suspect or dated, and we abandon all hope for their return to those who are nostalgic for ‘old-fashioned values.’ But if faithfulness is an essential virtue in any interpersonal relationship, perseverance is the virtue that is specifically related to time, and in our relationships we are confronted with the demands of both. In addition to this,

the values that we all proclaim fundamental and absolute depend on faithfulness and perseverance. How can there be justice if those who are just are not also faithful? How can there be freedom without the perseverance of those who are free? Without faithfulness and perseverance, no other value or virtue exists! Without faithfulness, for that matter, we are unable to build anything together with others. Today, our experience of time as fragmented and devoid of restrictions and boundaries makes faithfulness and perseverance a necessary challenge for all, and for Christians in particular. Christians know that their God is faithful and has made his faithfulness known in his Son Jesus Christ, “the Amen, the faithful and true witness” (Revelation 3:14) of whom Paul writes, “However many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him” (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20). Perseverance and faithfulness, then, are tied to the historical, temporal, relational, incarnate nature of Christian faith, and they define faith as a responsibility to be assumed within the limits of our historical existence.

Faith becomes something other than an abstraction only when it defines and shapes the entire span of our existence, until our death. Christians know that their faithfulness is sustained by God’s faithfulness to his covenant, expressed in the history of salvation as faithfulness toward those who are unfaithful and as forgiveness. In taking upon himself, through the Incarnation and Paschal event, our human situation of sin, poverty and death, God has expressed his faithfulness as total and unlimited responsibility for humanity and for each person. This means that the values of faithfulness and perseverance lead us directly to the even more radical issue of responsibility. Those who are irresponsible, like those who are narcissistic, will never be faithful. This is also true because genuine faithfulness is always faithfulness to a ‘you’ - either a person we love or a cause we love almost as we would a person - and this means that not every form of faithfulness is authentic! Holding a grudge against someone is, in a way, a form of faithfulness, but it is a form of faithfulness governed by hatred. The faithfulness we are speaking about here is an expression of love, is accompanied by gratitude, and includes the ability to stand firm in times of difficulty and contradiction. Jankélévitch defines faithfulness as “the determination to not give in to the temptation of apostasy.” Faithfulness is an active struggle whose arena is the human heart, and it is only possible when one’s heart is committed!

This means that our faithfulness depends on our inner freedom, our human maturity and our love. The situations of infidelity we enounter in our daily lives, situations in which a commitment or relationship is abandoned, often point to a problem in one of these areas. This is why we cannot, in the church, reduce the problem of faithfulness and perseverance, and their opposites, to a strictly juridical dimension, considering them solely from the point of view of laws to be observed. There is always the mystery of a person in question, and not simply an act of separation to be sanctioned. The act of separation should be considered revelatory of the situation of the heart - in other words, the inner identity - of the person in question. We should also remember that the dimension of infidelity is present within our faithfulness itself, just as doubt is present in the believer’s heart. What is the Bible if not the testimony of the people of Israel’s stubborn faithfulness in telling the story of their own infidelity in response to the faithfulness of God? How can we recognize our own faithfulness unless we see it as faith in the One who is faithful? In this sense, a ‘faithful’ Christian is a Christian who is capable of *memoria Dei*, who remembers the actions of the Lord - by constantly remembering God’s faithfulness, we are sustained in our own faithfulness at the very moment in which our infidelity is revealed to us. This is exactly what happens at the heart of the life of the church, during the Eucharistic anamnesis.

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