

The door of wonder

Advent 2024 – I meditation

1. The voice of the prophets

In the Advent season, the liturgy makes us listen to numerous prophetic texts, which aim to make us marvel at the mystery of the Incarnation: the coming and return of the Lord Jesus in the world and in history. They are readings full of enchantment and courageous hope where the prophets, men chosen and called by God to give voice to his word, try to revive the people by igniting visions and unprecedented perspectives. A hymn in the liturgy says it convincingly.

The voices of the prophets proclaim the Lord
who brings to all men the gift of peace.
Behold, a new light dawns in the morning,
a voice resounds: the King of glory comes.
In his first advent, Christ came to save us,
to heal the wounds of body and spirit.
At the end of time, he will return as judge;
he will give the promised kingdom to his faithful servants.

But who are the prophets? In the history of salvation, prophets appear as decisive figures because they alone know how to provide the key to understanding the meaning of human events, in their positive aspects and especially in their tragic ones. Prophets are men called by God to observe and announce in which direction history is moving according to God's plan and will. The instrument with which prophets carry out their ministry is the word. On the one hand, this word is strong, because it reports God's gaze and judgement on reality. On the other hand, however, their word is an extremely weak instrument, which cannot impose but only propose the thought of God.

The messages of the prophets - be they admonitions, oracles or visions - cannot be listened to with superficiality or distraction. Their power is such that it excludes any possibility of indifference: those who receive them are at a crossroads, between openness and acceptance or closure and rejection. This was true for Israel in ancient times and continues to be true for the Church today. But why does this happen? Because every prophetic oracle aims at fostering an encounter and a dialogue between two freedoms: that of God, always faithful to his covenant, and that of man, often uncertain and hesitant in responding to the call. But what happens to man when he listens to a prophetic word? A verse from a psalm illustrates this effectively.

‘One word God has spoken, two I have heard’ (Ps 62:12)

This wisdom maxim describes how the voice of the prophets touches our sensitivity. When they speak, it is as if we simultaneously perceive two voices: one that consoles and uplifts us, and another that troubles and reproaches us. It is precisely this ambivalence that emerges in the experience of Jeremiah, who, when called to become a prophet in Israel, manages to overcome his initial resistance.

The Lord stretched out his hand
and touched my mouth,
and the Lord said to me:
‘Behold, I place my words on your mouth.
See, today I give you authority
over nations and over kingdoms
to uproot and demolish,
to destroy and to tear down,
to build and to plant’ (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

Jeremiah feels intimidated by the task of speaking to the people, aware that his words will have to produce a double effect: to demolish in order to then also build up. This is precisely the paradox of every prophetic voice, evident in all the great pages of Scripture, from the major to the minor prophets. When the prophet speaks in the name of God, his words always contain an accusation, a firm call to responsibility and justice. However, this tone of warning and threat is transformed, often unexpectedly, into an opening of hope: God reaffirms the faithfulness of his love and offers the people a new opportunity to adhere to the gift of the covenant.

The difficulty we encounter in listening to the prophetic word stems from its communicative density, which aims to reactivate the dynamism of our conversion to God. Our heart, in fact, tends to become frightened and to close in the face of too intense stimuli. It would be naive to think that this closure depends solely on the harsh tones with which the prophets shake our conscience. In reality, we find ourselves deaf and unwilling to listen even - and especially - when the voice of God tries to reopen the channels of hope. Accepting good news is by no means immediate, especially when reality has long been marked by suffering, disappointment and uncertainty. The temptation to believe that nothing new can happen often creeps into our hearts, feeding a subtle cynicism.

Vanity of vanities, says Qoèlet,
vanity of vanities: all is vanity.
What gain comes to man
for all the toil with which he toils under the sun?

One generation goes away and another comes,
but the earth remains the same.
What has been will be
and what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun (Qoelet 1:2-4.9).

And yet the voice of the prophets reaches us right here, where we are tempted to believe that reality can no longer offer us new glimpses of light, that the promises we have tried to believe in will never be fulfilled, that the best things in life are just memories locked inside the memory box.

‘Remember no more past things,
think no more of old things!
Here, I do a new thing:
right now it sprouts, do you not see it?’ (Isaiah 43:18-19).

This is the challenge that the Advent season invites us to face: to become aware of God's presence and action within history and to reawaken our amazement at what he not only can, but above all, still wishes to accomplish in our lives and in the history of the world. During the more than thirty years of his ‘hidden’ life in Nazareth, Jesus assimilated this hope so deeply that, when he first proclaimed the Gospel to the world, he chose to begin with these very words: ‘The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel’ (Mark 1:15).

2. The courage to dissent

To prepare ourselves to listen to the prophetic voices that, every Advent, guide us towards the celebration of Christmas and this year also towards the beginning of the holy year of the Jubilee, we can turn our gaze to two female figures: Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary. In their human and spiritual experience are condensed the two fundamental attitudes to allow the prophetic word to generate in us an authentic dynamism of salvation.

Following the chronology of events carefully ordered by the evangelist Luke, Elizabeth's entrance onto the scene is prepared by the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist addressed to her husband, Zechariah, while he is performing his priestly duties in the temple in Jerusalem. The Gospel relates that the husband and wife, although they were righteous and blameless before God, ‘had no children, because Elizabeth was barren and both of them were advanced in years’ (Luke 1:7). Although barrenness is ascribed only to the woman - according to a custom typical of ancient cultures - we can immediately notice a certain spiritual barrenness in Zechariah as well. During a moment of officiating in the temple, we find him unable to welcome with confidence the

announcement of an event long desired, but perhaps no longer considered possible.

An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right hand of the altar of incense. When he saw him, Zechariah was troubled and seized with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Fear not, Zacharias, your prayer has been answered and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. You shall have joy and exultation, and many shall rejoice at his birth, for he shall be great in the sight of the Lord; he shall not drink wine or intoxicating liquor, he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, and he shall lead many of the children of Israel back to the Lord their God. He shall walk before him with the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the rebellious to the wisdom of the righteous, and to prepare for the Lord a people well disposed' (Luke 1:11-17).

The angel's announcement contains extraordinary news: a son will be born, destined to become great in the eyes of God and filled with the power of his Spirit. With his testimony of life and his word, he will lead the children of Israel to find their way back to the Lord. From the words of the angel we understand that this unlikely birth is the answer to a prayer that Zechariah had probably been addressing to the Lord for a long time, during his married life. Yet, just as God announces that this gift is about to be realised, Zechariah struggles to let go of his joy and confidence.

Zechariah said to the angel: 'How shall I ever know this? I am old and my wife is advanced in years'. The angel answered him: 'I am Gabriel, who stand before God and have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this glad tidings. And behold, you will be dumb and unable to speak until the day these things come to pass, because you have not believed my words, which will be fulfilled in their time' (Luke 1:18-20).

The question of the elderly priest might seem entirely legitimate, almost inevitable. The doubt is understandable: how can two now elderly spouses give birth to a child? However, the archangel Gabriel's answer is clear and immediate: in wanting to 'know', i.e. 'understand', this seemingly impossible proposal from God, Zechariah has revealed that his heart is perplexed and cannot believe. Because of this lack of faith, he will remain mute and will not be able to speak until an appointed day, which will not coincide with John's birth, but with the moment of his circumcision, according to the prescriptions of the Law.

Eight days later they came to circumcise the child and wanted to call him by his father's name, Zechariah (Luke 1:59).

Although Zechariah knew that the child's name would not be his own, but 'John', neighbours and relatives who had flocked for the ceremony insisted on following tradition, suggesting that he be named after his father. Patronymia, a widespread practice in many ancient cultures, was intended to strengthen family identity, creating a sense of belonging and continuity over time. At the same time, this custom reflected a view of history based on generational continuity, in which the present was interpreted primarily in relation to the past, rather than the future. But this is not the only way of looking at reality. To recognise that the destiny of every life is a mystery guarded by God requires a different perspective, entrusted by the Gospel to the sudden voice of a woman.

But his mother intervened: 'No, his name will be John' (Luke 1:60).

The difference in meaning between the two names was not so significant: Zechariah means 'God remembers', while John means 'God uses mercy'. Both names evoke God's presence in human history, albeit with different accents. The name Zechariah looks to the past, recalling the salvation that God has built over time: his interventions, his wonders, his faithfulness. It expresses the idea that the past must necessarily define and guide the present. John, on the other hand, shifts the focus to today, emphasising what the Lord intends to accomplish in the present in view of a future full of hope. In this sense, the name John becomes a prophecy of renewal: it suggests that history, though influenced by its legacies, is always capable of overcoming itself and opening up to new possibilities.

They said to her, 'There is no one of your kinship called by this name. Then they asked her father with nods what he wanted her to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote: 'John is his name'. Everyone was amazed. Instantly his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke blessing God (Luke 1:61-64).

Elizabeth's reaction surprised those present, because it introduced an unusual criterion, breaking with custom and suggesting that, at times, it is necessary to break continuity in order to be open to God's newness. Elizabeth's polite 'protest' is not enough to change the common opinion: a confirmation and a nod from the *pater familias*, Zacharias, is awaited. The elderly priest has a second chance to believe God's announcement, and this time he has no hesitation: this child will be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord has spoken (cf. Is 62:2). Great wonderment breaks out among all the guests and Zechariah's tongue loosens and opens again in praise.

Elizabeth and Zechariah, not without suffering and a long personal journey, understood that God was not only faithful to their history, but was preparing in it the surprise of a great novelty. The change of name revealed a profound

meaning to them: while the former simply reflected the custom of linking the son's life to that of his father, the latter contained the surplus of a revelation, the grace of a promise from the Lord that had been difficult to believe. Where we think that existence is drastically marked by its initial (parental) conditions, the Gospel proclaims that between the premises and the development of a human life there is also - above all - discontinuity, a certain presence of God that snatches a person's name from any already written destiny and from any fatalism. The Lord's mercy is not a static attribute of his goodness, but a dynamism of compassion that is continually at work in the folds of history, succouring the failings of human frailty and the limitations that each generation brings with it.

Today more than ever, we need to recover this kind of spiritual gaze on reality. We are living through an extraordinary time in human history, in which, alongside the grave injustices, wars and violence that afflict every corner of the world, new discoveries, promising advances and paths of liberation are emerging and advancing day by day. Yet, against this backdrop of new and ancient possibilities, we are sometimes too focused on the present: we struggle to invest in the future, we are wrapped up in worries, we take ourselves too seriously, and we are unable to carry the burden of life lightly. We are so focused on the 'here and now', imprisoned in an oppressive materialism that we can no longer grasp God's dream and the gentle, strong breath of his Spirit in reality. That is why we tend to imagine tomorrow as a photocopy of today, to repeat daily gestures and routines without much hope for the future. In this widespread climate, the world's temptation becomes that of trusting solely in its own strength, while the Church's temptation could be that of closing in on itself.

Elizabeth's 'no', placing John's fate in God's hands reminds us that nothing and no one is conditioned only by their own history and roots, but also reconditioned by God's grace. Every human story, with its lights and shadows, is never fixed in a book already written, with an inevitably predetermined number of pages. By opening ourselves to listening to the Word of God and learning to recognise his work and providence, we can discover that the best is yet to come, that the best days are still ahead of us and that life's adventure has just begun.

3. The humility of adhere

If in Elizabeth we saw how necessary it is to know how to say 'no' to the apparent continuity of things and ties, in Mary of Nazareth we can see the need to know how to say 'yes' to the newness of God, formulating a free and joyful assent to his will. We know the Gospel of the Annunciation very well, because the liturgy proposes it to us on various occasions during the liturgical year. On this occasion, we want to retrace it only in those passages that can help us

recover some awe of the mystery of the Incarnation.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin, betrothed to a man of the house of David, named Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary (Luke 1:26-27).

Mary is described as a virgin. This adjective is not only used to define her biological condition, but also her inner attitude. Let us not forget that the Church has always regarded Mary as Virgin (*ante, in and post partum*) and Mother, thus linking the condition of her virginity to that of her divine maternity. In this perspective, virginity is to be understood as the capacity to be so welcoming and open to life that one can also become extraordinarily fruitful. Faced with that special seed that is the Word of God, Mary's virginity shows us how important it is to keep an open and trusting heart, in order to be able to welcome God's will and bear its tasty fruit.

In describing the mysterious encounter that took place at the Annunciation, the evangelist describes the angel's approach to Mary as '*entering towards her*'. Luke uses a verb (*eiserchomai*) which in Greek means 'to move, to enter into a space or within a condition'. The angel's task, therefore, does not seem to be merely to go inside a physical place, but to enter Mary's heart, without forcing the doors of her availability in any way. The Word needs nothing else: to cross the doors of our availability and reach us to that place where dialogue with God can develop in mutual freedom. This stage of the inner life is perhaps one of the most delicate in our entire Christian life. The entrance of the Word of God into us is a wonderful but also traumatic event, comparable to the moment when a needle or a blade pierces our skin, causing upset and pain. This is exactly how the author of the letter to the Hebrews imagines it, when he tries to describe the effect that the word of God has on entering the depths of our hearts.

The word of God is living, effective and sharper than any two-edged sword; it penetrates to the dividing point of soul and spirit, to the joints and marrow, and discerns the feelings and thoughts of the heart. There is no creature that can hide itself before God, but everything is naked and uncovered in the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12-13).

The word of God acts in us like a sword, sharp, piercing, capable of reaching us in the soul, in the centre of ourselves, there where all the joints of our life stand together in a fragile balance. This place so intimate and, often, so foreign even to our conscience is precisely our heart, where our identity in God's eyes appears naked and perfectly recognisable. Inside us, there is a resistance to allowing ourselves to be encountered right here, because we sense that the existential balance in which we have settled could be challenged. Having inherited the instinct of concealment from Adam, we are constantly tempted to

prevent God from casting his gaze on who we really are. We fear this encounter because we know that God's gaze could suddenly shatter all certainty and make us lose control of our lives. At the same time, we strongly desire this encounter, because we know that only within God's gaze will we finally be able to recognise ourselves in a new light, that of a great love, capable of renewing all things. Mary accepts the word of the Lord and allows his voice to announce surprising news to her.

'Rejoice, full of grace: the Lord is with you'. At these words she was greatly troubled and wondered what the meaning of such a greeting was (Luke 1:28).

The angel addresses to Mary an imperative that is as beautiful as it is paradoxical. If joy is the condition we all wish to live for as long as possible, it is also true that it is a difficult feeling to improvise when we lack it. Conversely, if our heart is filled with joy, we cannot fail to manifest it externally. Why, then, is the Virgin commanded to smile? The answer is not long in coming. The angel recognises Mary as a beautiful creature, loved and filled with grace. And he invites her to realise this. It is the same 'sensation' that Jesus experiences at the moment of his baptism, when he hears the voice from heaven saying: 'You are my Son, the beloved: in you I have put my pleasure' (Mark 1:11). Just as Jesus feels loved, chosen, cherished by the Father's gaze, in the same way Mary is invited by the angel to perceive herself as something gracious and pleasing in God's eyes. The angelic voice culminates in the wonderful promise - all to be believed - that between the young woman of Nazareth and the Almighty there is no distance: 'the Lord is with you'.

Confronted with this news, Mary enters into a deep turmoil. The evangelist describes her as distraught, like a boat being shaken and stirred by a sudden tidal wave. Why? For at least two reasons. The first is that when someone manifests his love to us, it is always a surprise. Love is not a foregone conclusion, but a new instance every time it happens. The certainty of being loved is never acquired once and for all. Every day - perhaps even every moment - we need to feel recognised and accepted for who we are. It is fresh bread that our hearts need to chew all the time. The second reason why Mary feels fear when confronted with the angelic voice is because her heart senses that the time has come to allow herself to be fully redefined by God's voice. When we are reached by a great invitation, one that fills us with dignity, we enter into a healthy turmoil because our freedom needs to verify and possibly validate what is being affirmed about us and our lives. We all struggle to leave behind the judgments and looks that have defined us. We have become so accustomed to a small, sometimes bad, idea of ourselves that we are unable to open ourselves up to a renewed and improved perception of our identity. We are not used to looking at ourselves with God's eyes, but with the demanding

eyes of others or with the merciless eyes of ourselves. It is as if the word of God were to be written on a sheet of paper where many other statements have already accumulated and been organised over time, leaving little room for further statements. This is what waiting and listening are for in Advent: to allow God's voice to enter us to tell us anew what we are and can be before his face.

The angel said to her: 'Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with God' (Luke 1:30).

Mary is invited to go through the fear she is experiencing, because what God wants to propose to her is, in reality, something very compatible with the grace her heart was already seeking.

And behold, thou shalt conceive a son, give birth to him, and call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom shall have no end (Luke 1:31-33).

The mission appears truly enormous: the risk of not being understood by anyone, indeed of being judged by all (as an adulteress) is very serious and probable according to the prescriptions of the Law of Moses.

When a virgin maiden is betrothed and a man, finding her in the city, lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that city and stone them to death: the maiden, because, being in the city, she did not cry out, and the man because he dishonoured his neighbour's woman. Thus you shall root out the evil in your midst. But if the man finds the maiden betrothed in the field, and in doing violence to her he lies with her, then only the man who has lain with her shall die, but thou shalt not do anything to the maiden. In the maiden there is no guilt worthy of death: as when a man assaults his neighbour and kills him, so it is in this case, because he met her in the fields. The young girlfriend was able to cry out, but there was no one to come to her aid (Deuteronomy 22: 23-27).

Mary is met by the angel in the very city where, staying within the terms defined by the Law, she could also have cried out and refused the call to an 'impossible' pregnancy according to human criteria¹. Out of metaphor, this

¹ Famous is St Bernard's homily where Mary's freedom in the face of God's annunciation is described with sublime and dramatic accents: 'You have heard, Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that this will come to pass, not by the work of a man, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits the answer; he must return to God who sent him. We also await, O Lady, a word of compassion, we who are miserably burdened by a sentence of damnation. Here is offered to you the price of our salvation: if you consent, we shall be delivered at once. We were all created in the eternal Word of God, but now we are subject to death: by your short answer we must be renewed and called back to life. Weeping for you, pious Virgin, Adam exiled from paradise with his wretched offspring; Abraham and David beseech you; the holy patriarchs who are your ancestors, who also dwell in the dark region of death, insistently beseech you. The whole world is waiting,

means that every announcement from God necessarily exposes one to death, because it contains the promise of a full life, entirely given to God and to the world. The fear felt in the face of this kind of responsibility can only be overcome in one way: by considering the beauty and greatness of what awaits us. The angel, in fact, offers the Virgin no reassurance about the risks to which God's call exposes her. He only announces to her, with great frankness, the possibility and the glory of becoming the Mother of the Lord. Mary then allows herself to be drawn with extreme naturalness to this divine destiny, activating the most precious resource our heart has: holy awe.

Then Mary said to the angel: 'How shall this be, for I know no man?' (Luke 1:34).

This question is completely different from the one that rendered Zechariah mute. The Virgin does not want to understand God's plan in detail, she simply wants to participate in it freely and consciously. That is why she poses a question, doing the thing that signals unequivocally how we are becoming passionate about a proposal that is being communicated to us.

The angel answered her: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore he who is born will be holy and will be called the Son of God' (Luke 1:35).

The angel's answer is not exhaustive, but very evocative. It is not explained to the Virgin how she will generate the flesh of the Son of God. She is only told that the Holy Spirit will be her faithful guardian for the duration of the journey, as a cloud does when from above it overshadows what is on earth. The Virgin senses that she not only has a heart swollen with a marvellous project, but also that her shoulders are covered by a superior and faithful force, that of God. Faced with God's impossible proposal, Mary no longer needs to ask for anything. The design sketched by the angelic word is sufficiently intriguing and disturbing, terrible and wonderful. The Virgin, however, wants to conclude this experience of annunciation herself, not by merely offering God assent, but by

prostrate at your knees: on your mouth depends the consolation of the wretched, the redemption of the prisoners, the liberation of the condemned, the salvation of all the children of Adam, of the whole human race. O Virgin, quickly give the answer. Respond promptly to the angel, indeed, through the angel, to the Lord. Answer your word and receive the divine Word, give the word that passes and receive the eternal Word. Why delay? Why fear? Believe the work of the Lord, give your assent to it, accept it. In your humility take boldness, in your truthfulness take courage. In your virginal simplicity you must not now forget prudence; but in this one thing, O prudent Virgin, you must not fear presumption. For if modesty in silence is pleasing, now piety in speech is rather necessary. Open, blessed Virgin, your heart to faith, your lips to assent, your womb to the Creator. Behold, he to whom the desire of all peoples is turned knocks at the door. Let it not be, that while you are hesitant, he passes by, and you must, sorrowful, begin again to seek him whom you love. Rise up, run, open! Arise with faith, run with devotion, open with your assent (St Bernard, *Homilies on Our Lady*, Hom. 4, 8-9; Opera omnia, ed. Cisterc. 4, 1966, 53-54).

trying to formulate an impassioned consent to what her heart has intuited and begun to believe.

Then Mary said: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word' (Luke 1:38).

Mary first of all allows herself to be found, being able to admit what our humanity, after the estrangement due to sin, was no longer able to say to God: 'Here I am', 'you have found me', 'I am not fleeing', 'I am ready, I remain at your disposal'. After asking Mary to smile, it is now God's turn to rejoice. At last a humanity emerges from history that is not afraid, indeed it is happy, to recognise itself as the 'help' that God has always waited for and sought in order to find a correspondence to his universal plan of love.

Finding herself useful to God and to the salvation of the world, Mary decides to bid farewell to the heavenly messenger through a verb in the optative form ('may it be for me'), with which the Greek language is capable of expressing a desiring proposition ('may heaven will that', 'perhaps'). In this way Mary declares all her enthusiasm for the call she has just received. She does not bow her head in that attitude of affected humility with which we often accept things by pretending to be convinced and content. He says to the angel: 'What you have proposed to me to accept, in reality, I am now the one who wants and chooses it'. This is how an immaculate heart, filled with astonishment, reacts when it hears and accepts the word of God, exclaiming: 'Of course!'

Mary allows herself neither to be prayed for nor forced, but happily appropriates what the angel has proposed to her to believe. Thus she wrests from God her last smile, letting him know that it is no longer heaven's alone initiative to stitch together the human and the divine. The earth, too, now desires the same destiny of communion. All the announcements we receive on life's journey cannot but end in this way. When the light of God succeeds in showing us that within the fear of what awaits us is the fidelity of an eternal promise, wonder is born in us and we discover ourselves capable of finally pronouncing our 'here I am'.

Conclusion

To set out towards the Lord's Christmas and to cross the door of the Jubilee with a living hope, the first movement of the heart to be awakened is wonder. It is not enough, however, to listen to the good, true and promising words that God continually addresses to us. We must first loosen the rigidities of the heart, saying 'no' to everything that risks closing us in and weighing us down: fear, resignation, cynicism. Only in this way can we open ourselves up to the newness of God, welcoming in us the seed of his good will for all. If our hearts allow themselves to be renewed by wonder, we will know how to look at everything with new eyes, recognising those seeds of the Gospel already

present in reality, ready to sprout to bring God's fruit into the world.

Thou hast willed, O Father, that at the annunciation of the angel the immaculate Virgin should conceive thy eternal Word, and enveloped in the light of the Holy Spirit should become the temple of the new covenant: grant that we may humbly adhere to thy will, as the Virgin entrusted herself to thy word. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

p. Roberto Pasolini, OFM Cap.
Preacher of the Pontifical Household