

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, October 5, 1978

## Who is Our Neighbour in the Old Testament

This year we would like to look more closely at the extraordinary figure of the human person, our neighbour; we would like to thoroughly examine all the richness of this figure and God's plan for the relationship of the human person with each one of us.

Since the very beginning we were always convinced that we could not go to God alone, but we had to go with our neighbours, because God is the father of all. So the Movement has always given great consideration to the neighbour

To begin with we had a special contact with the poor, though this wasn't to the exclusion of everyone else. Then as we made contact with everyone we recognised what an enrichment was being brought to our lives by our neighbour, and how in the Movement, our neighbour was taking the first place – after God, with God and for God. ...

### The Human Being in the Old Testament: the Image of God

But who is this neighbour that we have run to meet, that we want to meet?

In order to understand in greater depth what the Holy Spirit has caused us to do and is still making us do, let's see if we can understand what revelation says.

Let's go back to Genesis: *Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'* (Genesis 1:26-27). This passage doesn't really say what the human person is, but what God intends to do, what God does. In other words, who is the human being according to the creative intention of God? The decision to create humankind is closely linked to the creation of humankind according to his image. Both these things in practice underline the fact that the Creator is about to create someone who has something to do with Himself.

Unlike all other beings including the animals who are created "each according to their kind" (Genesis 1:25), only human beings are created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). The human person is therefore the only being who has a direct and personal relationship with God: he stands before him; he is his counter-part, his "you". This special relationship with God is part of the very make-up of his being human. ...

And this is stupendous; this is true! Is it not the human being who "calls out for" the existence of God, thus becoming His greatest witness? Is it not the human being who feels in his heart unlike all other beings on earth - a call to something, to someone who transcends himself, a longing for what is infinite and immortal?

Is it not the human being, who unable to find solutions to the infinite problems that the cosmos poses, raises his eyes in search of Someone who must exist because he can't not exist? This is the make-up of the human being when he is pure and sincere. ...

### God's Creature

Although the theme of the image of God expresses the greatness and dignity of human beings, the Old Testament teaches above all that they are creatures: creatures of God. Therefore, inasmuch as they are creatures, on the level of being, they are radically different from their Creator and totally dependent upon Him. ...

The Creature to be Loved

Moreover for the Old Testament, the human being is a creature to be loved. In the book of Leviticus God commands: *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.* (Leviticus 19:17-18).

And at another point: *The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.* (Leviticus 19:34).

Worship and the Prophets

When the Israelites believed that they were satisfying God with their acts of worship alone, the Lord sent the prophets who called them back to an interior conversion and this was expressed in love for their neighbour as a witness to love for God. In fact we can see that whenever the law of God was neglected "in relationships between people, and God himself was sought only in worship, then God was reduced to an impersonal source of magic power, which could be manipulated with no feeling of reverence whatsoever simply by means of a meticulous routine..."<sup>1</sup>

Seeing that the cult led to a falsification of the very essence of religion, the prophets had no other choice but to radically reject this cult<sup>2</sup>, which provoked the indignation and judgment of God: *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:21-24).

*...the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns,* (Hosea 4:1-3).

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.* (Hosea 6:6)

*When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.* (Isaiah 1:15-17).

This controversy about worship showed "that the proper relationship with God is determined by the proper relationship with humankind and that the divine service of the liturgy must always be accompanied by the service of people."<sup>3</sup>

Basically, the prophets lashed out "against that perversion which throughout the centuries, threatens every human cult: sacrifice, worship and prayer preserve their true meaning only as long as the important thing for people is to really encounter the holy God. But if with his sacrifice people wishes to find a safe place for themselves in the face of God, then they become blasphemies; the sacrifice becomes a means of self-justification, the celebration of worship an occasion for a merely sentimental elevation, prayer - useless chatter, faint-hearted or hypocritical talk."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. Eichrodt, "Theology of the Old Testament", London: SCM, 1961 pg. 365.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "ibid".

<sup>3</sup> Füglistner, "Afferrati da Jahwe...", in Parola e Messaggio", p.222.

<sup>4</sup> Kaiser, "Jesaia 1-12", p. 13.

Fasting that God likes: Love of Neighbour

Nor is God pleased with fasting separated from love of the neighbour: *Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion... Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ... Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (Isaiah 58:1-9 cf. 59:1)*

After such a severe criticism of the abuses committed during days of fasting (v. 3-4), we could expect Isaiah to reaffirm these rites in their due sanctity. Instead the opposite takes place (v.5): these ritual practices: mortification, self denial, to bow one's head, to use sack-cloth and ashes, are radically opposed. The fasting which is pleasing to God consists in substituting actions directed towards God, with actions directed towards other people: in this way people are truly mortified and thus offer God a kind of fasting.

Among the various actions, there is one that is particularly pleasing to God: to loosen the chains, and free people from oppression. The experience of exile and of slavery in Egypt and then of the liberation worked by God, gives Israel an appreciation of what freedom is.

The other actions listed by Isaiah are the traditional ones of helping the needy. The masses of those who are socially the weakest pass before our eyes: the underprivileged, the ruined, slaves, prisoners, hungry, migrants, beggars: it's a picture similar to that of the last judgment (cf. Mt. 25:35). God invites Israel to help them "without turning your back on your own people" (Isaiah 58:7): literally it would mean "do not hide yourself, don't turn away (pretending that you don't see (cf. Deuteronomy 22:1) from your own flesh", that is, from one who is of your flesh. From the context this can be interpreted as referring to each human being, not only to one's fellow-countryman, as was generally intended among the Israelites (cf. Job 31:15).

These verses from Job are beautiful: *I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy... I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. (Job 29:12-13,15-16).*

If this kind of fasting which is pleasing to God is practiced, then blessings will come.

Love of Enemies

And lastly, the Old Testament is not without mention of love for enemies: *If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21-22).*

In conclusion, the People of Israel were therefore awaiting the New Testament. It is that same New Testament that the Lord, in his immense goodness, also wishes to enlighten for us. Through the Movement, too, he does this, underlining right from the beginning how our love for our neighbour is a genuine and basic expression of our love for God.