

Flood of Mercy, Flood of Tears: Two places of the Divine's Experience

(originally delivered in Spanish)

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Philippians 1:9-10

Flood of mercy and tears: two places of the Divine's experience .but, how can we speak about a flood of mercy after Superstorm Sandy? How can we talk about floods of joy and mercy without talking also about the floods of water and tears?

Advent (from Latin, Ad-ventus, meaning coming, arrival, manifestation) has the liturgical meaning of remembering the coming of Jesus Christ the Messiah. In our western world, it could be that this is good, but it is not a universal principle. The world is not only the Western world. The concept of west – occidental in Latin – is accidental. There is also in the world, as in our brains, an East. For this reason, in resonance with transcultural studies, I prefer to think of Advent as an invitation to presence. A presence that is not limited to Christian tradition, but is, in other words, a manifestation of experience with the Divine. The experience of God is no more and no less than the experience of life, with both mercy and tears.

In the texts that were chosen for this Advent, goodness and happiness appear to be intertwined with evil and sorrow; joy and suffering with mercy and tears. Whether we like it or not, mercy and tears are two places of the experience of God.

Among all the texts, is this phrase from Paul's plea: "to help you choose what is best." "To help you determine what is best." These few words remind us that to harvest mercy or to harvest tears depends on us (our actions). The majority of spiritual traditions have this in common.

Our topic/theme is a dilemma: flood of mercy, flood of tears, the Divine's experience. It is a profound question. We need to find at least a few phrases to help locate/situate us.

No culture, no religion alone can resolve the human problem.

Our topic/theme is a mystery such that we need to approach/explore other spiritual traditions beyond Christian interpretation. God has not spoken in only one book. For this reason, I will make a few references to other scriptures. Nevertheless, we should not forget the ancient wisdom that says that the Scripture is writing/written word and nothing more (else). What we need is to hear the Word (of God). Please understand: I continue to be a Christian, but I am aware that my pilgrim journey does not end there.

Ultimately, the experience of the Divine in mercy and tears is a universal experience. An experience of life, and not only the Christian life; much less the western Christian life.

"Blessed (cheerful and happy) are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" says the first sermon of Jesus of Nazareth. "Suffering exists" says the noble truth of the first sermon of Buddha of Benarés. And both reveal a pathway. Or, better said, both become the Path (the Way).

Not everything can be said, because not everything can be thought. When we think about God, God becomes an object of thought; that is to say, something we can think about and manipulate. God is not an object of investigation. There is no object "God" that can be investigated, or experimented on. God cannot be the answer to any question. The divine mystery is ineffable and literally means "nothing spoken can

describe it.” Is it possible that belief in God is the only form of valid religion? Look: God is not essential for religion. “God” is a name, a symbol of a mystery, an icon of mystery, but is not the only one. Doctrines are not immutable, and beliefs change.

To repeat: Jesus of Nazareth, just as Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, both show us a path that is not based in beliefs and doctrines, but rather in faith and experience. “Follow me and come and see” said Jesus. “Don’t believe me because I say so, but rather try it, experience it, come and see” said Buddha. Belief does not help us “determine what is best.” Faith is not belief. Faith is confidence in experience, is the capacity for openness to *something else*.

Our theme refers to the Divine experience. As I said, I think of Advent as a manifestation of the experience of God. Let us reflect on three aspects. First, brief thoughts about the experience of God. Second, the experience of the divine in floods of mercy. And third, the experience of the divine in a flood of tears.

I confess that there is something blasphemous to want to think about or explain the experience of God. Of God one only knows what cannot be known. It (the experience of God) can happen or not happen; it can be a long process or immediate; wrapped in tenderness or in catastrophe. For this reason, perhaps Mary’s attitude of silence (or should we say feminine attitude?) in that not knowing; she preferred to “hold all these things in her heart.” The reason is not the only form of intelligence, nor is it the most elevated. But even still, I risk a few words – always limited – about the experience of God.

The experience of God is not a special experience, much less is it a specialized experience. It is in the experience of eating, of drinking, of loving, of work, of being with

someone, a good counsel, taking a misstep, etc. In each of these the divine can be found.

The experience of God is the deep root of each and every one of our human experiences: of a friend, a word, communion, conversation, love, pain, goodness, beauty, pleasure, anguish, cold... the experience of grace and disgrace; the flood of mercy, or the flood of tears.

The experience of God coincides with the experience of a contingency, a crossroads. This means to brush up against the crossroads, the choice. It is a paradoxical experience. It is in reaching a certain limit that we encounter the border of the infinite (*cum tangere* = touch the infinite). So, it means to reach one's own limits, but to also open oneself to "something" that transcends all limits. This experience makes us humble and able to comprehend, it keeps us from clinging to anything and from judging: "Do not judge." And for both Jesus and Buddha, this is where the happiness to live begins.

The experience of God is personal. But the initiative does not depend on us. It is not my experience about God, but rather the experience of God (in me and through me). There are no recipes. No realization highways. You can't sell it in any market, even if it be called a Temple. And, someone became furious about this 2,000 years ago. "Walker there is no way" said a Spanish poet. There are as many paths as there are travelers, repeats the ancient wisdom.

As we get close to Christmas, we feel inundados (flooded) by mercy; we feel our love flow more naturally. Misericordia (Mercy), compasión (compassion), gozo (joy), alegría (happiness) are words that together convey love. In the spiritual traditions of

humanity, love is the privileged place of God. The Hindu Vedas say : “Love was there since the beginning.” And also, “love was the first of the gods.” Early Christians affirmed: God is Love (1Jn 4:8). For the medieval scholars of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Love is God.

This message is so important that Christianity stands out by affirming that “one cannot know God or love God if one does not know human love.” It is a feature of all world cultures: All human love is the privileged place for the experience of God. For early Christianity, the human experience of love was the path toward the experience of God. This encounter, this loving relationship, free, detached and pure, is an image of God, as the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene affirm. Later, patriarchal Christian religion forgot to teach its faithful the art of love as the privileged experience of God.

Love of God that does not become incarnate in mercy toward one’s neighbor is pure lie, says Christian scripture. “I want mercy” cries out God in the voice of his prophets. And Buddhism has always taught compassion, infinite compassion.

Advent, then, celebrates the presence of love. There are not words to express this Presence. To celebrate is more than to know or to reflect. Could we possibly think as we stand before a baby? What is important is to open one’s heart, to listen to the word in silence, to prepare the soul, reconcile oneself with everyone and everything. Why? Our text replies: So that you may be able to choose what is best...

But not everything was joy. Soon, sadness arrived. Not everything was a flood of mercy; soon the flood of tears arrived.

Mercy is not the only thing that floods us. We are also flooded by tears from suffering and evil. This is a delicate matter. Puritan Christianity, and to some extent liberal Christianity, are shocked by the affirmation that suffering and evil are also privileged places for the experience of God. We always attribute good and positive things to God. But we forget that the God of the New Testament lets rain fall on both the good and the bad, on the just and the unjust. Or, as some Panishad Hindus say, "The Gods love darkness." Even in Jewish scriptures, Satan – the symbol of evil – never stops being a willing (unwitting) co-laborer with God's. Understand, I am not saying that God is "evil." Rather, what I am saying is that in the experience of suffering, and even evil, one can also encounter God.

We aren't accustomed to hearing these things during Advent. Why? Could it be that the *baby* Jesus and his parents didn't suffer? Let's be clear: certain suffering is not incompatible (double negative = is compatible) with happiness. Suffering is the most universal sacrament. Suffering cannot be explained. "Why me? Why to me?" This is the message of Buddha: It is a fundamental truth, suffering, and we have to overcome it."

Suffering can bring us closer to God or distance us from the divine. It can purify us, or degrade us; mature us, or make us desperate. Could it be that the experience of suffering purifies our childish ideas about God? Suffering could be an existential wake up, and with it, it becomes the place to experience God. "I am completely without support, and nonetheless supported [by Jesus]," said the mystic Therese de Lissieux. Pain awakens. "The gods are formed by hammer strikes," says one wisdom tradition. It is enough for us to recall the cry of the newborn baby born in exile, the scream of the adult Jesus on the cross. The experience of God is not a knick knack.

Many times, the advent of goodness passes through the experience of evil. Although it might shock us, the experience of evil is closely related to the experience of God. This was Jesus Christ's experience.

Evil may be incomprehensible, but neither is good understandable. Evil does not exist to be comprehended, but rather combatted. For this reason, to prevent it and to relieve it are both human responsibilities. Both Jesus and Buddha avoided elocutions ("speechifying") about transcendent matters; both dedicated themselves to what really mattered: human liberation.

Nor should we fall into the interior narrative that "If God allows it [evil] it is for a reason." Nor external activism of "God with us." Neither cheap intimacy nor frenetic activism. There is a middle way.

The holy Jesus Christ is free, and the wise Buddha smiles. The Christian message reminds us that the world can end badly (apocalypse), but it can also end well. The Buddhist message tells us that it is in our hands whether it ends well or badly.

Advent is a remembering – to bring once more to one's heart – so bring the heart to these words:

"It is better to what is good... If a person does what is good, s/he should do it again and again..." says Buddhism.

So that you may be able to choose what is best... says Christianity.