

The Vision

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O King Agrippa, I was
not disobedient unto the
heavenly vision.

Acts 26:19

Let us place these words of the Apostle Paul within their historical context. Paul is a prisoner at Caesarea, in the hands of the Roman procurator Festus. Accused by the Jews, but privileged as a Roman citizen, he is to be transferred to Caesar's tribunal in Rome. The coming to Caesarea of the Jewish King Agrippa and the princess Berenice provides Festus with the opportunity of elucidating a difficult case. Paul is therefore summoned before the procurator and his distinguished guests. He recalls to them the history of his life, putting both as a starting point and a centre the vision which he had on the road to Damascus and which decided the further orientation of his existence. And he does not hesitate to sum up this last in a short, but extraordinarily loaded with meaning, sentence: "King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

It is on this theme - the vision - that I should like to say here a few words. What is this Vision we shall be referring to? I shall answer: any true, any genuine vision coming from God. By "Vision" I do not mean a physical sensation, fit to be compared with those that may be expressed in words such as: I see this tree, I see that table. Nor do I mean a mere product of the imagination, a fiction of our mind. I am speaking of an inner impression, of an immaterial, incorporeal perception, more or less clear, more or less confused, brought to us from further on than ourselves, from higher than ourselves. The Vision I speak of is "supernatural." It is something sent by God. One may say that each philosophy, each global conception of the world, each work of art starts with a certain image which a man carries with him, in him, and which he will but repeat with multiple variations and names. Even the "pure" line drawn by an "abstract painter" may become a durable and overruling inspiration. But the Vision I now refer to has a divine origin. It takes many forms, always slightly vague, always mixing light and shade in some indefiniteness. It may assume human features. It may raise before us a certain image of Christ. It may evoke other personages, or certain scenes always endowed with an ideal vague, a stimulus, a challenge, a violent rupture from the limited and narrow realities hardened by our selfishness. The Vision introduces what is new.

Paul's vision on the road to Damascus was a vision almost complete and perfect (I say "almost" because visions granted to men can never be perfect and complete). The Damascus vision united features or components that appear essential to a divine, authentic and far reaching vision. Paul is suddenly surrounded with light, but he at the same time becomes blind for a while. He falls down as thunder-struck, unconditionally self-surrendering to the unknown Power. He interrogates that Power: who art thou? And, when the Lord answers: I am Jesus, he, trembling and astonished, says: What wilt thou have me to do¹? Here we find all the elements present to *the*

¹ Acts 9,3-6

Vision (for visions are but modalities of the Vision): the light that makes everything new, the God-sent blindness which temporarily shuts us from what is alien to the Vision, the prostration or more exactly the lying flat on the ground that makes it impossible for humility to throw itself further down, the divine word which is heard and finally the decision, the act of radical and sacrificial obedience which confess to the Vision its practical value: What wilt thou have me to do?

This is the Vision almost perfect, almost complete, the highest Vision that can be given to a man. We are not Paul. But, in each God-given vision, whatever its form may be (and the Vision may take the most various aspects and even express itself through non-Christian symbols) we find the most fundamental elements of the Vision of Paul. Let us for instance take the representation or inspiration (so mixed!) which the image of Jesus not seldom evokes in the minds of our hippies, of our drugged boys and girls, of our "sex perverts", of the mass of men and women who refuse the definitions and structures of the Churches, but regard with some respect the Person of Jesus and even love, Him in a confused way. Let us think of the "Jesus movement" or, better said, Jesus movements and "Jesus kids". What do these youth think, whom do they see when they pronounce the name of Jesus? As far as my impression has been, they see in some indistinct appearance a kind of whiteness, a Purity, a welcoming Love, two arms, two hands extended towards men. And there is the ocean of human suffering, the multitude of the heavy-laden whose troubled eyes look towards the Compassionate, the Merciful. Here is the Vision in the incipient state, a vision very imperfect, very incomplete, very intermittent. It may come and disappear, but the Vision has been there, is there. Let us remember the words of the Gospel, "They shall look on him, whom they pierced ²."

Is the Vision before us? I believe that the Vision is offered to every one of us. I am persuaded that in the life of each one there has been a minute when he had a glimpse of a reality which was both far above us and acting within us, even if we did not know how to name it. And he who experiences this vision cannot entirely forget it. In the midst of many tumults the inner voice continues to call: "The Master is come and calleth for thee ³."

You are young. Thinking of you whom I don't know and who perhaps read these lines, I think of the words of Joel quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost: "I shall pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams ⁴." And the old man, in his "dream" prays that the powerful blessed Vision should launch on the roads of the Ancient World and New World small groups of young people having had a personal experience of this unique Vision, - not necessarily priests or theologians or preachers, but simple young laymen who, without discussing, would say: This is what I saw, will you too see it? They would not claim to be the Church, but only to actualise, according to their measure, in the power of Pentecost and with the blessing of the Church, the essence (not parasitic accretions) of what the Church proclaims. Of course they would emphasize peace and justice and the liberation of man from all oppressions but they would find again accents (now rare) to announce the Saviour, the Redeemer, the Master of the Vision. Is this impossible? Could our SYNDESMOS –

² John 19,37

³ John 11,28

⁴ Acts 8,17

Oh, so humbly - start under divine guidance a “revival”? Could you, would you take a part in it ?

Only the Vision can give unity to our life - the Vision seen in our immediate circumstances and yet infinite. Shall we, when the end will come, be able to repeat the words of Paul: “I was not unfaithful to the Vision”?

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Lev Gillet