

OUR FEARS

By Franco Maggiotto

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**“And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying,
The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants,
and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw giants;
and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”
*Numbers 13:32-33.***

There are moments when we are asked to take a difficult step and the difficulties we face threaten us like an army of giants. The one who is asking us to move onward is God who wants us to be free, who wants to give us an inner "promised land" of freedom and responsibility, and also a social one of peace and justice. But the possession of this land requires of us a fight; it is a gift from God that we are to conquer. The attitude of the explorers gives a good description of the fear that distorts reality and makes us see giants where there are none, and transforms the land where milk and honey flow into a land which devours its inhabitants. It is that very fear we have of those who are different from us because they belong to another people, another faith or another culture. Meeting another human being is a bit like entering a foreign country: it is an adventure which can cause insecurity.

But agreeing to meet ourselves can cause fear too, because it means not hiding behind reassuring certainties and looking at ourselves as we are, with our defects and weaknesses. The two things are related: the more we fear looking inside ourselves, the more the other person puts us in a critical position and seems like an enemy. If we are to enter the promised land we must conquer our fear of giants, above all the ones we carry within. And to do this we need to welcome God's gift: it is something that does not come from us – our life, the neighbour with whom we are to grow, and the land where we are to live. The Bible story speaks to us of a conquest to be made and enemies to be fought but its significance extends to other battles

against discouragement and the lack of confidence of those who doubt that justice can win over abuses of power and that forgiveness can take the place of revenge.

God forgives in this story too. God forgives a people who want to go back to the slavery of Egypt, though despite this there will be consequences. The people must wander through the desert for forty years until there is a completely new generation (14:34). In any case, God does not abandon us, not for ever. If we are not able to take the step now, it may be necessary to turn back and search some more, but God's promise remains abiding. That is how it may be for us: we feel safer in the desert we know than in the new land that God wants to give us, and we mourn the safety of our dependence and our lack of commitment. Is this how we are today?

However the desert is also the symbolic place of our meeting with God. This is how Jesus's ministry begins with forty days in the desert where the Spirit had taken Him to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1). It is a place of preparation and absorption before facing the battle which is about to begin. And it is in this very desert together with the tempter, that God's help is also given to us. God's retreating, according to the words of Numbers 14:34 is not abandonment but a distancing which allows us to face our difficulties and fears in order to take the step into the land of the promise, which we have put off so many times already.

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