



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 20 December 2006

The meaning of Christmas

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"The Lord is close: come, let us adore him". With this invocation, the liturgy invites us in these last days of Advent to approach as it were on tip-toe the Bethlehem Grotto where the extraordinary event that changed the course of history took place: the birth of the Redeemer.

On Christmas Night we will pause, once again, before the crib and contemplate with wonder the "Word made flesh". Sentiments of joy and gratitude will be renewed in our hearts, as they are every year, while we listen to the Christmas melodies that sing of the extraordinary event in so many languages.

It was out of love that the Creator of the universe came to dwell among us. In his Letter to the Philippians, St Paul says that Christ, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (2: 6). He appeared in human form, adds the Apostle, humbling himself. At holy Christmas we will relive the fulfilment of this sublime mystery of grace and mercy.

St Paul says further, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4: 4-5). In truth, the Chosen People had been waiting for the Messiah for many centuries but they imagined him as a powerful and victorious army leader who would free his

followers from foreign oppression.

The Saviour, on the contrary, was born in silence and in absolute poverty. He came as "the light that enlightens every man", St John notes, yet "his own people received him not" (Jn 1: 9, 11). "But", the Apostle added, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (*ibid.*, 1: 12). The light promised was to illumine the hearts of those who had persevered in vigilant and active expectation.

The Advent liturgy also exhorts us to be sober and watchful in order not to let ourselves be burdened by sin and excessively worldly concerns. Indeed, it is by watching and praying that we will be able to recognize and accept the splendour of Christ's birth. St Maximus of Turin, a Bishop of the fourth and fifth centuries, said in one of his homilies: "The time warns us that the Birth of Christ the Lord is at hand. The world with its own apprehensions speaks of something imminent that will renew it, and desires with impatient expectation that the splendour of a brighter sun may illumine its darkness.... This expectation of creation also persuades us to wait for Christ, the new Sun, to rise" (*cf. Hom.* 61a, 1-3). Creation itself, therefore, leads us to discover and recognize the One who must come.

But the question is: is the humanity of our time still waiting for a Saviour? One has the feeling that many consider God as foreign to their own interests. Apparently, they do not need him. They live as though he did not exist and, worse still, as though he were an "obstacle" to remove in order to fulfil themselves. Even among believers - we are sure of it - some let themselves be attracted by enticing dreams and distracted by misleading doctrines that suggest deceptive shortcuts to happiness.

Yet, despite its contradictions, worries and tragedies, and perhaps precisely because of them, humanity today seeks a path of renewal, of salvation, it seeks a Saviour and awaits, sometimes unconsciously, the coming of the Saviour who renews the world and our life, the coming of Christ, the one true Redeemer of man and of the whole of man.

Of course, false prophets continue to propose a salvation "at a cheap price", that always ends by producing searing disappointments.

The history of the past 50 years itself demonstrates this search for a Saviour "at a cheap price" and highlights all the disappointments that have derived from it. It is the task of us Christians, with the witness of our life, to spread the truth of Christmas which Christ brings to every man and woman of good will.

Born in the poverty of the manger, Jesus comes to offer to all that joy and that peace which alone can fulfil the expectations of the human soul.

But how should we prepare ourselves to open our hearts to the Lord who comes? The spiritual attitude of watchful and prayerful expectation remains the fundamental characteristic of the Christian in this Advent Season. It is this attitude that distinguishes the protagonists of that time: Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the Magi, the humble, simple people, above all Mary and Joseph's expectation! The latter, more than any of the others, felt in the first person the anxiety and trepidation for the Child who would be born.

It is not difficult to imagine how they spent the last days, waiting to hold the newborn Infant in their arms. May their attitude be our own, dear brothers and sisters! In this regard, let us listen to the exhortation of St Maximus, Bishop of Turin, cited above: "While we are waiting to welcome the Nativity of the Lord, let us clothe ourselves in clean garments, without a stain. I am speaking of clothing the soul, not the body. Let us not be clad in silk raiments but in holy works! Sumptuous clothing may cover the limbs but does not adorn the conscience" (*ibid.*).

In being born among us, may the Child Jesus not find us distracted or merely busy, beautifying our houses with decorative lights. Rather, let us deck our soul and make our families a worthy dwelling place where he feels welcomed with faith and love. May the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph help us to live the Mystery of Christmas with renewed wonder and peaceful serenity.

With these sentiments, I would like to offer my most fervent good wishes for a holy and happy Christmas to all of you present here and to your relatives, with a special remembrance for those who may be in difficulty or who are suffering in body and spirit. Happy Christmas to you all!

To special groups

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today. May these final days of Advent be full of spiritual wonder. To you and your loved ones, especially those who may be in difficulty or suffering, I extend my best wishes for a happy and holy Christmas!

I greet the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the Delegation of the Calabria Region, come for the official presentation of the great Christmas tree set up in St Peter's Square and of the others trees arranged in this Hall, in the Apostolic Palace and in various other places in the Vatican.

I thank you for this gift from your Land of Calabria, a heartfelt "thank you!". And I extend my special thanks to all who made possible this tribute which reminds visitors of the birth of Jesus, Light of the world.

Lastly, I would like to greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, thank you for your participation in this encounter. Christmas is in a few days' time, and I imagine that at

home you are putting the finishing touches to your cribs, which are a particularly evocative portrayal of the Nativity. I hope that such an important element, not only of our spirituality but also of our culture and art, will continue to be a simple and eloquent way of recalling the One who came "to dwell among us". Merry Christmas to you all!

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