



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERE OF THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica
Saturday, 2 December 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The first antiphon of this evening's celebration is presented as the opening of the Advent Season and re-echoes as the antiphon of the entire liturgical year. Let us listen to it again: "Proclaim to the peoples: God our Saviour is coming".

At the beginning of a new yearly cycle, the liturgy invites the Church to renew her proclamation to all the peoples and sums it up in two words "*God comes*". These words, so concise, contain an ever new evocative power.

Let us pause a moment to reflect: it is not used in the past tense - God has come, - nor in the future - God will come, - but in the present: "God comes".

At a closer look, this is a continuous present, that is, an ever-continuous action: it happened, it is happening now and it will happen again. In whichever moment, "God comes".

The verb "to come" appears here as a theological verb, indeed theological, since it says something about God's very nature.

Proclaiming that "God comes" is equivalent, therefore, to simply announcing God himself, through one of his essential and qualifying features: his being the *God-who-comes*.

Advent calls believers to become aware of this truth and to act accordingly. It rings out as a

salutary appeal in the days, weeks and months that repeat: Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now!

The one true God, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", is not a God who is there in Heaven, unconcerned with us and our history, but he is the-God-who-comes.

He is a Father who never stops thinking of us and, in the extreme respect of our freedom, desires to meet us and visit us; he wants to come, to dwell among us, to stay with us.

His "coming" is motivated by the desire to free us from evil and death, from all that prevents our true happiness. God comes to save us.

The Fathers of the Church observe that the "coming" of God - continuous and, as it were, co-natural with his very being - is centred in the *two principal comings of Christ*: his Incarnation and his glorious return at the end of time (cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 15,1: PG 33, 870).

The Advent Season lives the whole of this polarity.

In the first days, the accent falls on the expectation of the Lord's Final Coming, as the texts of this evening's celebration demonstrate.

With Christmas approaching, the dominant note instead is on the commemoration of the event at Bethlehem, so that we may recognize it as the "fullness of time".

Between these two "manifested" comings it is possible to identify a third, which St Bernard calls "intermediate" and "hidden", and which occurs in the souls of believers and, as it were, builds a "bridge" between the first and the last coming.

"In the first", St Bernard wrote, "Christ was our redemption; in the last coming he will reveal himself to us as our life: in this lies our repose and consolation" (*Discourse 5 on Advent*, 1).

The archetype for that coming of Christ, which we might call a "spiritual incarnation", is always Mary. Just as the Virgin Mother pondered in her heart on the Word made flesh, so every individual soul and the entire Church are called during their earthly pilgrimage to wait for Christ who comes and to welcome him with faith and love ever new.

The liturgy of Advent thus casts light on how the Church gives voice to our expectation of God, deeply inscribed in the history of humanity; unfortunately, this expectation is often suffocated or is deviated in false directions.

As a Body mystically united to Christ the Head, the Church is a sacrament, that is, a sign and an effective instrument of this waiting for God.

To an extent known to him alone, the Christian community can hasten his Final Coming, helping humanity to go forth to meet the Lord who comes.

And she does this first of all, but not exclusively, with prayer.

Next, essential and inseparable from prayer are "good works", as the prayer for this First Sunday of Advent declares, and in which we ask the Heavenly Father to inspire in us "the desire to go with good works" to Christ who comes.

In this perspective, Advent is particularly suited to being a season lived in communion with all those who - and thanks be to God they are numerous - hope for a more just and a more fraternal world.

In this commitment to justice, people of every nationality and culture, believers and non-believers, can to a certain extent meet. Indeed, they are all inspired by a common desire, even if their motivations are different, for a future of justice and peace.

Peace is the goal to which the whole of humanity aspires! For believers "peace" is one of the most beautiful names of God, who wants all his children to agree with one another, as I also had the opportunity to recall on my Pilgrimage in Turkey in the past few days.

A hymn of peace rang out in Heaven when God became man and was born of a woman in the fullness of time (cf. Gal 4: 4).

Let us therefore begin this new Advent - a time granted to us by the Lord of time - by reawakening in our hearts the expectation of the God-who-comes and the hope that his Name will be hallowed, that his Kingdom of justice and peace will come, that his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Let us allow the Virgin Mary, Mother of the God-who-comes and Mother of Hope, to guide us in this waiting.

May she whom we will celebrate as Immaculate in a few days obtain for us that we be found holy and immaculate in love at the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be praise and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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