



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS OF THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Saturday, 29 November 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With this evening liturgy, we begin the itinerary of a new liturgical year, entering into the first of its seasons: Advent. In the biblical reading that we have just heard, taken from the First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul uses precisely this word: "coming", which in Greek is *parusia* and *adventus* in Latin (1 Thes 5: 23). According to the common tradition of this text, Paul urges the Christians of Thessalonica to keep themselves blameless "for the coming" of the Lord. However, in the original text one reads "in the coming" (εν τη παρουσια), almost as if the advent of the Lord were more so than a future point in time a spiritual place in which to walk already in the present, while waiting, and in which one is indeed perfectly preserved in every personal dimension. In fact, it is exactly this that we live out in the liturgy. By celebrating the liturgical seasons we actualize the mystery in this case the Lord's coming as it were "walking in it" towards its full realization at the end of time, but already drawing sanctifying virtue from it, since the last times have already begun with Christ's death and Resurrection.

The word that sums up this particular state, in which one awaits something that is to be manifested but of which one also already has a glimpse and a foretaste, is "hope". Advent is the spiritual season of hope par excellence, and in it the whole Church is called to become hope, for herself and for the world. The whole organism of the Mystical Body acquires, so to speak, the "colour" of hope. The whole People of God continue on their journey, attracted by this mystery: that our God is "the God who comes" and calls us to go to meet him. How? In the first place in that universal form of hope and expectation which is prayer, which is eminently expressed in the Psalms, human words in which God himself has placed and continually places the invocation of his coming on the

lips and in the hearts of believers. Let us therefore reflect for a few moments on two of his Psalms which we have just prayed and which are consecutive in the biblical Book: Psalms 141 and 142, according to the Jewish numbering.

"I have called to you, Lord; make hasten to help me! / Hear my voice, when I cry to you. / Let my prayer arise before you like incense, / the raising of my hands like an evening oblation" (Ps 141[140]: 1-2). Thus begins the first Psalm of the First Vespers for the first week of the Psalter: words which, at the beginning of Advent, acquire a new "colour", because the Holy Spirit makes them resound ever anew within us in the Church on her way between the time of God and human times. "Lord, hasten to help me!". It is the cry of someone who feels he is in grave danger but it is also the cry of the Church amid the many threats that surround her, that threaten her holiness, the irreproachable integrity of which the Apostle Paul speaks which instead must be preserved for the Lord's coming. And in this invocation the cry of all the just also resounds, of all those who want to resist evil, the seduction of an iniquitous well-being, of pleasures offensive to human dignity and to the condition of the poor. At the beginning of Advent the Church's liturgy once again makes this cry her own, and raises it to God "like incense" (v. 2). The evening offering of incense is in fact a symbol of prayer, of the outpouring of hearts turned to God, to the Most High, as well as "the raising of... hands like an evening oblation" (v. 2). Material sacrifices, as it also took place in the Jewish temple, are no longer offered in the Church, but the spiritual offering of prayer is raised, joined to that of Jesus Christ who is at the same time Sacrifice and Priest of the new and eternal covenant. In the cry of the Mystical Body we recognize the very voice of the Head: the Son of God who has taken upon himself our trials and our temptations, to give us the grace of his victory.

This identification of Christ with the Psalmist is particularly evident in the second Psalm (142). Here, every word, every invocation, makes one think of Jesus in his passion, and in particular of his prayer to the Father in Gethsemane. In his first coming, with the Incarnation, the Son of God wanted to share fully in our human condition. Of course, he did not share in sin, but for our salvation suffered all its consequences. In praying Psalm 142 the Church relives every time the grace of this compassion, of this "coming" of the Son of God in human anguish so deeply as to plumb its depths. The Advent cry of hope then expresses from the outset and very powerfully, the full gravity of our state, of our extreme need of salvation. It is as if to say: we await the Lord not in the same way as a beautiful decoration upon a world already saved, but as the only way of liberation from a mortal danger and we know that he himself, the Liberator, had to suffer and die to bring us out of this prison (cf. v. 8).

In short, these two Psalms shelter us from any temptation to escape or flee from reality; they preserve us from a false hope that might desire to enter Advent and move towards Christmas forgetting the tragedy of our personal and collective existence. In fact, a trustworthy hope that is not deceptive, can only be a "Paschal" hope, as the canticle of the Letter to the Philippians reminds us every Saturday evening, with which we praise the Incarnate Christ, crucified, Risen and our universal Lord. Let us turn our gaze and our heart to him, in spiritual union with the Virgin

Mary, Our Lady of Advent. Let us place our hand in hers and enter joyfully into this new time of grace that God gives as a gift to his Church for the good of all humanity. Like Mary and with her maternal help, let us make ourselves docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, so that the God of peace may sanctify us totally, and the Church become a sign and instrument of hope for all men. Amen.

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