



The Holy See

FIRST VESPERS OF THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Saturday, 26 November 2005*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With the celebration of First Vespers of the First Sunday in Advent we are beginning a new liturgical year. In singing the Psalms together, we have raised our hearts to God, placing ourselves in the spiritual attitude that marks this season of grace: "vigilance in prayer" and "exultation in praise" (cf. *Roman Missal*, Advent Preface, II/A).

Taking as our model Mary Most Holy, who teaches us to live by devoutly listening to the Word of God, let us reflect on the short Bible Reading just proclaimed.

It consists of two verses contained in the concluding part of the First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians (I *Thes* 5: 23-24). The first expresses the Apostle's greeting to the community: the second offers, as it were, the guarantee of its fulfilment.

The hope expressed is that each one may be made holy by God and preserved irreproachable in his entire person - "spirit, soul and body" - for the final coming of the Lord Jesus; the guarantee that this can happen is offered by the faithfulness of God himself, who will not fail to bring to completion the work he has begun in believers.

This First Letter to the Thessalonians is the first of all St Paul's Letters, written probably in the year 51. In this first Letter we can feel, more than in the others, the Apostle's pulsating heart, his paternal, indeed we can say maternal, love for this new community. And we also feel his anxious concern that the faith of this new Church not die, surrounded as she was by a cultural context in

many regards in opposition to the faith.

Thus, Paul ends his Letter with a hope, or we might almost say with a prayer. The content of the prayer we have heard is that they [the Thessalonians] should be holy and irreproachable to the moment of the Lord's coming. The central word of this prayer is "coming". We should ask ourselves what does "coming of the Lord" mean? In Greek it is "parousia", in Latin "adventus", "advent", "coming". What is this "coming"? Does it involve us or not?

To understand the meaning of this word, hence, of the Apostle's prayer for this community and for communities of all times - also for us - we must look at the person through whom the coming of the Lord was uniquely brought about: the Virgin Mary.

Mary belonged to that part of the People of Israel who in Jesus' time were waiting with heartfelt expectation for the Saviour's coming. And from the words and acts recounted in the Gospel, we can see how she truly lived steeped in the Prophets' words; she entirely expected the Lord's coming.

She could not, however, have imagined how this coming would be brought about. Perhaps she expected a coming in glory. The moment when the Archangel Gabriel entered her house and told her that the Lord, the Saviour, wanted to take flesh in her, wanted to bring about his coming through her, must have been all the more surprising to her.

We can imagine the Virgin's apprehension. Mary, with a tremendous act of faith and obedience, said "yes": "I am the servant of the Lord". And so it was that she became the "dwelling place" of the Lord, a true "temple" in the world and a "door" through which the Lord entered upon the earth.

We have said that this coming was unique: "the" coming of the Lord. Yet there is not only the final coming at the end of time: in a certain sense the Lord always wants to come through us. And he knocks at the door of our hearts: are you willing to give me your flesh, your time, your life? This is the voice of the Lord who also wants to enter our epoch, he wants to enter human life through us. He also seeks a living dwelling place in our personal lives. This is the coming of the Lord. Let us once again learn this in the season of Advent: the Lord can also come among us.

Therefore we can say that this prayer, this hope, expressed by the Apostle, contains a fundamental truth that he seeks to inculcate in the faithful of the community he founded and that we can sum up as follows: God calls us to communion with him, which will be completely fulfilled in the return of Christ, and he himself strives to ensure that we will arrive prepared for this final and decisive encounter. The future is, so to speak, contained in the present, or better, in the presence of God himself, who in his unfailing love does not leave us on our own or abandon us even for an instant, just as a father and mother never stop caring for their children while they are growing up.

Before Christ who comes, men and women are defined in the whole of their being, which the Apostle sums up in the words "spirit, soul and body", thereby indicating the whole of the human person as a unit with somatic, psychic and spiritual dimensions. Sanctification is God's gift and his project, but human beings are called to respond with their entire being without excluding any part of themselves.

It is the Holy Spirit himself who formed in the Virgin's womb Jesus, the perfect Man, who brings God's marvellous plan to completion in the human person, first of all by transforming the heart and from this centre, all the rest.

Thus, the entire work of creation and redemption which God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, continues to bring about, from the beginning to the end of the cosmos and of history, is summed up in every individual person. And since the first coming of Christ is at the centre of the history of humanity and at its end, his glorious return, so every personal existence is called to be measured against him - in a mysterious and multiform way - during the earthly pilgrimage, in order to be found "in him" at the moment of his return.

May Mary Most Holy, the faithful Virgin, guide us to make this time of Advent and of the whole new liturgical year a path of genuine sanctification, to the praise and glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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