

Though we have reached the liturgical fulfillment of Advent, here is a chance to look at what His Holiness Benedict XVI calls us to in his beautiful homily on the First Vespers of Advent, the starting point which is the hopeful longing that remains with us all year.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With this celebration we are entering the liturgical season of **Advent**. In the biblical Reading we have just heard, taken from the *First Letter to the Thessalonians*, the Apostle Paul invites us to prepare for "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5: 23), with God's grace keeping ourselves blameless. The exact word Paul uses is "coming", in Latin *adventus*, from which the term "Advent" derives.

Let us reflect briefly on the meaning of this word, which can be rendered with "presence", "arrival" or "coming". In the language of the ancient world it was a technical term used to indicate the arrival of an official or the visit of the king or emperor to a province. However, it could also mean the coming of the divinity that emerges from concealment to manifest himself forcefully or that was celebrated as being present in worship. Christians used the word "advent" to express their relationship with Jesus Christ: Jesus is the King who entered this poor "province" called "earth" to pay everyone a visit; he makes all those who believe in him participate in his Coming, all who believe in his presence in the liturgical assembly. The essential meaning of the word *adventus* was: God is here, he has not withdrawn from the world, he has not deserted us. Even if we cannot see and touch him as we can tangible realities, he is here and comes to visit us in many ways.

The meaning of the expression "advent" therefore includes that of *visitatio*, which simply and specifically means "visit"; in this case it is a question of a visit from God: he enters my life and wishes to speak to me. In our daily lives we all experience having little time for the Lord and also little time for ourselves. We end by being absorbed in "doing". Is it not true that activities often absorb us and that society with its multiple interests monopolizes our attention? Is it not true that we devote a lot of time to entertainment and to various kinds of amusement? At times we get carried away. Advent, this powerful liturgical season that we are beginning, invites us to pause in silence to understand a presence. It is an invitation to understand that the individual events of the day are hints that God is giving us, signs of the attention he has for each one of us. How often does God give us a glimpse of his love! To keep, as it were, an "interior journal" of this love would be a beautiful and salutary task for our life! Advent invites and stimulates us to contemplate the Lord present. Should not the certainty of his presence help us see the world with different eyes? Should it not help us to consider the whole of our life as a "visit", as a way in which he can come to us and become close to us in every situation?

Another fundamental element of Advent is expectation, an expectation which is at the same time hope. Advent impels us to understand the meaning of time and of history as a *kairós*, as a favorable opportunity for our salvation. Jesus illustrated this mysterious reality in many parables: in the story of the servants sent to await the return of their master; in the parable of the

virgins who await the bridegroom; and in those of the sower and of the harvest. In their lives human beings are constantly waiting: when they are children they want to grow up, as adults they are striving for fulfillment and success and, as they advance in age, they look forward to the rest they deserve. However, the time comes when they find they have hoped too little if, over and above their profession or social position, there is nothing left to hope for. Hope marks humanity's journey but for Christians it is enlivened by a certainty: the Lord is present in the passage of our lives, he accompanies us and will one day also dry our tears. One day, not far off, everything will find its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice and peace.

However there are many different ways of waiting. If time is not filled by a present endowed with meaning, expectation risks becoming unbearable; if one expects something but at a given moment there is nothing, in other words if the present remains empty, every instant that passes appears extremely long and waiting becomes too heavy a burden because the future remains completely uncertain. On the other hand, when time is endowed with meaning and at every instant we perceive something specific and worthwhile, it is then that the joy of expectation makes the present more precious. Dear brothers and sisters, let us experience intensely the present in which we already receive the gifts of the Lord, let us live it focused on the future, a future charged with hope. In this manner Christian Advent becomes an opportunity to reawaken within ourselves the true meaning of waiting, returning to the heart of our faith which is the mystery of Christ, the Messiah who was expected for long centuries and was born in poverty, in Bethlehem. In coming among us, he brought us and continues to offer us the gift of his love and his salvation. Present among us, he speaks to us in many ways: in Sacred Scripture, in the liturgical year, in the saints, in the events of daily life, in the whole of the creation whose aspect changes according to whether Christ is behind it or whether he is obscured by the fog of an uncertain origin and an uncertain future. We in turn may speak to him, presenting to him the suffering that afflicts us, our impatience, the questions that well up in our hearts. We may be sure that he always listens to us! And if Jesus is present, there is no longer any time that lacks meaning or is empty. If he is present, we may continue to hope, even when others can no longer assure us of any support, even when the present becomes trying.

Dear friends, **Advent** is the season of the presence and expectation of the eternal. For this very reason, it is in a particular way a period of joy, an interiorized joy that no suffering can diminish. It is joy in the fact that God made himself a Child. This joy, invisibly present within us, encourages us to journey on with confidence. A model and support of this deep joy is the Virgin Mary, through whom we were given the Infant Jesus. May she, a faithful disciple of her Son, obtain for us the grace of living this liturgical season alert and hardworking, while we wait. Amen!