

ADVENT: PREPARING FOR THE LORD'S COMING

“Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.” These words from the Collect for the first Sunday of Advent throw a powerful light on the particular character of this period at the beginning of the liturgical year. Echoing the attitude of the prudent virgins in the Gospel parable, who sensibly took enough oil with them to await the Bridegroom’s arrival,¹ the Church calls upon her children to be vigilant, to stay awake to receive Christ who is passing by, Christ who is coming.

A time of presence

The desire to go out to meet him, to prepare for the Lord’s coming,² makes us consider the Greek term *parousia*, which Latin renders as *adventus*, from which comes our word “Advent.” In fact *adventus* can be translated as presence, arrival, and coming. This word was not invented by the early Christians; in antiquity, it was normally used to designate the first official visit of someone important – the king, the emperor or one of his officials – coming to take possession of a province. It could also be used for the coming of the gods, emerging from obscurity to show themselves in strength, or to be celebrated by their worshippers. Christians adopted the term to express their relationship with Christ: Jesus is the King who has entered this poor “province,” our world, to visit all men and women. He is a King whose invitation to share in the feast of his Advent is extended to all who believe in him, all who are sure of his presence among us.

In using the word *adventus*, Christians were simply stating that God is here: our Lord has not withdrawn from the world, he has not left us alone. Although we cannot see him or touch him, as we can with sense-perceptible things, he really is here, and comes to visit us in many ways: in the reading of Sacred Scripture; in the sacraments, especially Holy Communion; in the liturgical year; in the lives of the saints; in the many happenings, however commonplace, of our daily lives; in the beauty of creation... God loves us; he knows our name; everything about us interests him and he is always present beside us. The certainty of his presence that the Advent liturgy suggests to us discreetly but constantly throughout these weeks, brings before our eyes a new image of the world. “This certainty which the faith gives enables us to look at everything in a new light. And everything, while remaining exactly the same becomes different, because it is an expression of God’s love.”³

¹ Cf. *Mt* 25:1ff.

² Cf. *I Thess* 5:23.

³ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 144.

Grateful remembrance

Advent invites us to stop and be silent, to take in the presence of God. These are days when we can think again about Saint Josemaría's words: "we've got to be convinced that God is always near us. We live as though he were far away, in the heavens high above, and we forget that he is also continually by our side. He is there like a loving father. He loves each one of us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children; helping us, inspiring us, blessing – and forgiving."⁴

If we steep ourselves in this reality, if we think about it often during Advent, we shall feel encouraged to talk confidently to him in our prayer and during the day; we will put before him the sufferings that make us sad, the impatience and questions that arise in our hearts. This is the right time to strengthen our conviction that he is always listening to us. "To you I lift up my soul, O my God. In you I have trusted; let me not be put to shame."⁵

We shall also understand that the unexpected turns a day can take are very personal touches from God, signs of his attentive watchfulness over each of us. Our attention is often drawn to problems and difficulties, and sometimes we scarcely have any energy left to perceive the many good, beautiful things that come from God. Advent is the time to consider more frequently how he has protected, guided and helped us throughout our life; to praise him for all he has done and continues doing for us.

By being watchful and attentive for loving details from our heavenly Father, our heart will pour out acts of thanksgiving. The grateful memory of the good things God has done for us helps us also in dark times of difficulties, problems, sickness, and suffering. "The joy of evangelising," wrote the Pope, "always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore."⁶ Advent is a time that invites us to keep, so to speak, an internal diary of the love God has for us. "I imagine," said Saint Josemaría, "that you, like me, will thank our Lord. I know too that, without falling into false humility, this thankfulness will leave you even more convinced that you have merited nothing of this on your own."⁷

God is coming

*Dominus veniet!*⁸ God is coming! This short exclamation opens the time of Advent, and is heard in a special way during these four weeks, and throughout the entire liturgical year. God is coming! It is not merely that God came in the past, nor a simple announcement that God will come in the future. It is something actually happening; it is happening now, and it will go on happening as time passes. At every moment, "God is coming"; in each moment of history, our Lord says: *my Father is working still, and I am working.*⁹

Advent invites us to become aware of this truth and act accordingly. *It is full time now for you to wake from sleep. Watch at all times. What I say to you I say to all: watch.*¹⁰ These calls

⁴ *The Way*, no. 267.

⁵ Entrance Antiphon, First Sunday of Advent; cf. *Ps* 24[25]:1-2.

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 13.

⁷ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 1.

⁸ *Roman Missal*, Tuesday of weeks 1-3 of Advent, Entrance Antiphon. Cf. *Zech* 14:5.

⁹ *Jn* 5:17.

¹⁰ *Rom* 13:11; *Lk* 21:36; *Mk* 13:37.

from Sacred Scripture in the readings for the first Sunday of Advent remind us of the constant comings, the *adventus*, of our Lord. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. God is not just in heaven, uninterested in us and our history. He really is the God who is coming. Meditating attentively on the texts of the Advent liturgy helps us to prepare so that we do not let his presence pass unnoticed.

For the Fathers of the Church, God's "coming" – continual, and part of his very being – is concentrated in the two main comings of Christ: his Incarnation, and his glorious coming at the end of history.¹¹ Advent unfolds between these two points. The first days underline the expectation of our Lord's last coming at the end of time. And as Christmas draws near, the memory of the Bethlehem event, which brought the fullness of time, becomes more vivid. "For these two reasons Advent is markedly a time of pious and joyful expectation."¹²

The first preface of Advent combines this double theme: "He assumed at his first coming the lowliness of human flesh, and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago, and opened for us the way to eternal salvation, that, when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope."¹³

Days of waiting and hope

The fundamental note of Advent, then, is one of waiting; but it is a waiting that our Lord comes to turn into hope. Experience shows us that we go through life waiting and hoping. When we are children we want to grow up; as young men and women we wait in hope for a great love to fulfil us; when we are adults we hope for professional fulfilment, a level of success to shape the rest of our lives; when we grow old our hope is for some well-earned rest. Nevertheless when these desires are fulfilled, and also when they fail, we realise that the thing hoped for was not everything. We need a hope which goes beyond what we can imagine, which will surprise us. And so, although we have great or small hopes which keep us going from day to day, without the greatest hope of all, born of the Love the Holy Spirit has placed in our hearts,¹⁴ everything else is insufficient.

The time of Advent encourages us to ask ourselves: What are we hoping for? What does our hope consist of? Or to go deeper: what meaning does my present life have, my today and now? "If time is not filled by a present endowed with meaning," said Benedict XVI, "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."¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 15:1 (2nd reading of the Office of Readings for the First Sunday of Advent).

¹² Roman Calendar, Universal norms for the liturgical year, no. 39.

¹³ *Roman Missal*, First Preface of Advent.

¹⁴ Cf. *Rom* 5:5.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Homily, Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent, 28 November 2009.

A crib for our God

Our present moment has meaning because the Messiah, expected for centuries, is being born in Bethlehem. Together with Mary and Joseph and with the help of our Guardian Angels we wait for him with renewed excitement. On coming among us Christ offers us the gift of his love and his salvation. For Christians hope is filled with certainty: our Lord is present all through our life, in our work, in our daily cares; he accompanies us all the time, and one day he will dry our tears. One day, not so far away, everything will find fulfilment in God's kingdom, a kingdom of justice and peace. "The season of Advent . . . restores this horizon of hope, a hope which does not disappoint, for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints!"¹⁶

Advent is a time of presence and of waiting for what is eternal; and a time of joy, an intimate joy that nothing can take away. *I will see you again*, Jesus promised his disciples, *and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*¹⁷ The joy of the time of waiting is a deeply Christian attitude that we can see in our blessed Lady: from the moment of the Annunciation "the Virgin Mother longed with love beyond all telling"¹⁸ for the coming of her Son, Christ Jesus. Mary teaches us to wait with a peaceful heart for the coming of our Lord, while we also prepare interiorly for that meeting, joyfully trying "to build a crib for our God in our hearts."¹⁹

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Angelus, 1 December 2013.

¹⁷ *Jn* 16:22.

¹⁸ *Roman Missal*, Second Preface of Advent.

¹⁹ Saint Josemaría, notes from a meditation, 25 December 1973 (AGP, Library, P09, p. 199).