



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 12 November 2008

Saint Paul (12)

Eschatology : the Expectation of the Parusia.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The subject of the Resurrection on which we reflected last week unfolds a new perspective, that of the expectation of the Lord's return. It thus brings us to ponder on the relationship among the present time, the time of the Church and of the Kingdom of Christ, and the future (*éschaton*) that lies in store for us, when Christ will consign the Kingdom to his Father (cf. 1 Cor 15: 24). Every Christian discussion of the last things, called eschatology, always starts with the event of the Resurrection; in this event the last things have already begun and, in a certain sense, are already present.

Very likely it was in the year 52 that St Paul wrote the first of his Letters, the First Letter to the Thessalonians, in which he speaks of this return of Jesus, called *parusia* or *advent*, his new, definitive and manifest presence (cf. 4: 13-18). The Apostle wrote these words to the Thessalonians who were beset by doubts and problems: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those who have fallen asleep" (4: 14). And Paul continues: "those who have died in Christ will rise first. Then we, the living, the survivors, will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly" (4: 16-17). Paul describes Christ's *parusia* in especially vivid tones and with symbolic imagery which, however, conveys a simple and profound message: we shall ultimately

be with the Lord for ever. Over and above the images, this is the essential message: our future is "to be with the Lord". As believers, we are already with the Lord in our lifetime; our future, eternal life, has already begun.

In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul changes his perspective. He speaks of the negative incidents that must precede the final and conclusive event. We must not let ourselves be deceived, he says, to think that, according to chronological calculations, the day of the Lord is truly imminent: "On the question of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we beg you, brothers, not to be so easily agitated or terrified, whether by an oracular utterance, or rumor, or a letter alleged to be ours, into believing that the day of the Lord is here. Let no one seduce you, no matter how" (2: 1-3). The continuation of this text announces that before the Lord's arrival there will be apostasy, and one well described as the "man of lawlessness", "the son of perdition" (2: 3) must be revealed, who tradition would come to call the Antichrist. However the intention of St Paul's Letter is primarily practical. He writes: "Indeed, when we were with you, we used to lay down the rule that who would not work, should not eat. We hear that some of you are unruly, not keeping busy but acting like busybodies. We enjoin all such and we urge them strongly in the Lord Jesus Christ, to earn the food they eat by working quietly" (3: 10-12). In other words, the expectation of Jesus' *parusia* does not dispense us from working in this world but, on the contrary, creates responsibility to the divine Judge for our actions in this world. For this very reason our responsibility for working *in* and *for* this world increases. We shall see the same thing next Sunday in the Gospel of the Talents, in which the Lord tells us that he has entrusted talents to everyone and that the Judge will ask for an account of them saying: have they been put to good use? Hence the expectation of his return implies responsibility for this world.

The same thing and the same connection between *parusia* the return of the Judge/Saviour and our commitment in our lives appears in another context and with new aspects in the Letter to the Philippians. Paul is in prison, awaiting a sentence that might be condemnation to death. In this situation he is reflecting on his future existence with the Lord, but he is also thinking of the community of the Philippians who need their father, Paul, and he writes: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the flesh, that means productive toil for me and I do not know which to prefer. I am strongly attracted by both: I long to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; yet it is more urgent that I remain alive for your sakes. This fills me with confidence that I will stay with you, and persevere with you all, for your joy and progress in the faith. My being with you once again should give you ample cause to glory in Christ" (1: 21-26). Paul has no fear of death; indeed, on the contrary, death indicates being totally with Christ. Yet Paul also shares in the sentiments of Christ who did not live for himself but for us. Living for others becomes his life and plan thus demonstrates his perfect readiness to do God's will, to do whatever God decides. Above all he is prepared, in the future as well, to live on this earth for others, to live for Christ, to live for his living presence and thus for the renewal of the world. We see that his being with Christ creates an broad inner freedom: freedom in the face of the threat of death but also freedom in the face of all life's commitments and sufferings. He is simply at God's disposal and truly free.

And now, after examining the various aspects of the expectation of Christ's *parusia*, let us ask ourselves: what are the basic convictions of Christians as regards the last things: death, the end of the world? Their first conviction is the certainty that Jesus is Risen and is with the Father and thus is with us forever. And no one is stronger than Christ, for he is with the Father, he is with us. We are consequently safe, free of fear. This was an essential effect of Christian preaching. Fear of spirits and divinities was widespread in the ancient world. Today too, missionaries alongside many good elements in natural religions encounter fear of the spirits, of evil powers that threaten us. Christ lives, he has overcome death, he has overcome all these powers. We live in this certainty, in this freedom, and in this joy. This is the first aspect of our living with regard to the future.

The second is the certainty that Christ is with me. And just as the future world in Christ has already begun, this also provides the certainty of hope. The future is not darkness in which no one can find his way. It is not like this. Without Christ, even today the world's future is dark, and fear of the future is so common. Christians know that Christ's light is stronger and therefore they live with a hope that is not vague, with a hope that gives them certainty and courage to face the future.

Lastly, their third conviction is that the Judge who returns at the same time as Judge and Saviour has left us the duty to live in this world in accordance with his way of living. He has entrusted his talents to us. Our third conviction, therefore, is responsibility before Christ for the world, for our brethren and at the same time also for the certainty of his mercy. Both these things are important. Since God can only be merciful we do not live as if good and evil were the same thing. This would be a deception. In reality, we live with a great responsibility. We have talents, and our responsibility is to work so that this world may be open to Christ, that it be renewed. Yet even as we work responsibly, we realize that God is the true Judge. We are also certain that this Judge is good; we know his Face, the Face of the Risen Christ, of Christ crucified for us. Therefore we can be certain of his goodness and advance with great courage.

Another element in the Pauline teaching on eschatology is the universality of the call to faith which unites Jews and Gentiles that is, non-Christians as a sign and an anticipation of the future reality. For this reason we can say that we are already seated in Heaven with Jesus Christ, but to reveal the riches of grace in the centuries to come (Eph 2: 6f.), the *after* becomes a *before*, in order to show the state of incipient fulfilment in which we live. This makes bearable the sufferings of the present time which, in any case, cannot be compared to the future glory (cf. Rm 8: 18). We walk by faith, not by sight, and even if we might rather leave the body to live with the Lord, what definitively matters, whether we are dwelling in the body or are far from it, is that we be pleasing to him (cf. 2 Cor 5: 7-9).

Finally, a last point that might seem to us somewhat difficult. At the end of his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul reiterates and also puts on the lips of the Corinthians a prayer that originated in the first Christian communities in the Palestinian area: *Maranà, thà!* which means literally, "Our Lord, come!" (16: 22). It was the prayer of early Christianity and also of the last book of the New

Testament, Revelation, which ends with it: "Come, Lord Jesus!". Can we pray like this too? It seems to me that for us today, in our lives, in our world, it is difficult to pray sincerely for the world to perish so that the new Jerusalem, the Last Judgment and the Judge, Christ, may come. I think that even if, sincerely, we do not dare to pray like this for a number of reasons yet, in a correct and proper way, we too can say, together with the early Christians: "Come, Lord Jesus!". We do not of course desire the end of the world. Nevertheless, we do want this unjust world to end. We also want the world to be fundamentally changed, we want the beginning of the civilization of love, the arrival of a world of justice and peace, without violence, without hunger. We want all this, yet how can it happen without Christ's presence? Without Christ's presence there will never be a truly just and renewed world. And even if we do so in a different way, we too can and must also say, completely and profoundly, with great urgency and amid the circumstances of our time: "Come, Lord Jesus! Come in your way, in the ways that you know. Come wherever there is injustice and violence. Come to the refugee camps, in Darfur, in North Kivu, in so many parts of the world. Come wherever drugs prevail. Come among those wealthy people who have forgotten you, who live for themselves alone. Come wherever you are unknown. Come in your way and renew today's world. And come into our hearts, come and renew our lives, come into our hearts so that we ourselves may become the light of God, your presence. In this way let us pray with St Paul: *Maranà, thà!* "Come, Lord Jesus!" and let us pray that Christ may truly be present in our world today and renew it.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, particularly priests from the Missionary Society of Saint Paul the Apostle, members of the Corpus Christi Movement for Priests, participants in the International Catholic Conference of Scouting, and pilgrims from the Philippines, England, Nigeria, and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

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