



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Hall

Wednesday, 22 December 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With this last Audience before the Christmas celebrations, we approach with trepidation and wonder the “place” where for us and for our salvation everything began, everything found fulfilment, where the expectations of the world and of the human heart converged with God’s presence.

We can already have a foretaste of joy now, brought by that small light which is glimpsed, which begins to shine out on the world from the Bethlehem grotto. During the [Advent](#) journey the Liturgy has invited us to live, we have been shown how to welcome with readiness and gratitude the great event of the Saviour’s birth and to contemplate full of wonder his entry into the world.

Joyful expectation, characteristic of the days that lead up to Holy Christmas, is certainly the fundamental attitude of the Christian who wishes to live fruitfully the renewed encounter with the One who comes to dwell among us: Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. Let us rediscover and make our own the disposition of heart of those who were the first to welcome the coming of the Messiah: Zachariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the simple people and, especially, Mary and Joseph, who felt trepidation personally, but above all rejoiced in the mystery of this birth.

The whole of the Old Testament constitutes one great promise that was to be fulfilled with the coming of a powerful Saviour. The Book of the Prophet Isaiah in particular— testifies to the

anguish of history and of the whole of creation oriented to a redemption destined to bring fresh energy and give a new orientation to the entire world.

Hence down the centuries, alongside the expectation of the figures of Sacred Scripture our expectation, which we are experiencing in these days and which keeps us alert throughout our life journey, also finds room and meaning.

Indeed, the whole of human life is enlivened by this profound sentiment, by the desire that what is the truest, the most beautiful and the greatest, which we have perceived and intuited with mind and heart, may come to meet us in order that it become real before our eyes and uplift us anew.

“Soon the Lord God will come, and you will call him Emmanuel, God-with-us” (*Entrance Antiphon*, Holy Mass of 21 December). We frequently repeat these words in these days. In Liturgical time, which reactualizes the Mystery, the One who comes to save us from sin and death is already at the door, the One who, after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, embraces us once again and opens wide to us the way to true life.

St Irenaeus explains it in his treatise *Adversus Haereses* [Against Heresies]”, when he says: “The Son of God himself descended ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom 8:3) to condemn sin and, having condemned it, to cast it out completely from the human race. He called man to likeness with himself, he made him imitator of God, he set him on the path indicated by the Father so that he might see God, and he gave him as a gift the Father himself” (III, 20, 2-3).

Some of St Irenaeus’ favourite ideas are presented to us, for example, that God with the Child Jesus calls us to likeness with himself. We see how God is. And thus St Irenaeus reminds us that we should be like God and must imitate him. God gave himself. God gave himself into our hands. We must imitate God. And lastly, is the thought that in this way we can see God. One central idea of St Irenaeus is that man does not see God, he cannot see him and so he is in the dark concerning the truth about himself. However man, who cannot see God, can see Jesus and so he sees God, so he begins to see the truth and so he begins to live.

The Saviour, therefore, comes to reduce to powerlessness the work of evil and all that can still keep us distant from God in order to restore to us the ancient splendour and primitive fatherhood. With his coming among us, God points out and assigns to us a task: precisely that of being like him and of striving for true life, to attain the vision of God in the Face of Christ. St. Irenaeus states further: “The Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father’s pleasure. For this reason God gave us as a ‘sign’ of our salvation the One who, born of the Virgin, is the Emmanuel” (*ibid.*).

Here too there is a very beautiful central idea of St Irenaeus: We must get used to perceiving God.

God is generally remote from our lives, from our ideas, from our actions. He has come to us and we must accustom ourselves to being with God. And Irenaeus dares boldly to say that God must also accustom himself to being with us and within us. And that God should perhaps accompany us at Christmas, should accustom us to God, just as God should accustom himself to us, to our poverty and frailty. Hence the coming of the Lord can have no other purpose than to teach us to see and love events, the world, and all that surrounds us with God's own eyes. The Word-become-a-Child helps us to understand God's way of acting so that we will be able to let ourselves be transformed increasingly by his goodness and his infinite mercy.

In the night of the world let us still be surprised and illumined by this act of God which is totally unexpected: God makes himself a Child. We must let ourselves be overcome with wonder, illumined by the Star that flooded the universe with joy. May the Child Jesus, in coming to us, not find us unprepared, dedicated only to making exterior reality more beautiful. May the care we give to making our roads and homes more splendid be an even greater incentive to predispose our soul to encounter the One who will come to visit us, who is the true beauty and the true light. Let us therefore purify our consciences and our lives of what is contrary to this coming: thoughts, words, attitudes and deeds — impelling ourselves to do good and to contribute to achieving in our world peace and justice for every person, and thus to walk towards our encounter with the Lord.

A characteristic sign of this Christmas Season is the Nativity scene. In St. Peter's Square too, in keeping with the tradition, it is almost ready and looks out in spirit over Rome and over the whole world, representing the beauty of the Mystery of God who was made man and pitched his tent among us (*cf.* John 1:14).

The crib is an expression of our expectation that God is coming close to us, that Jesus comes close to us, but it is also an expression of thanksgiving for the One who decided to share in our human condition, in poverty and simplicity.

I am glad because the tradition of preparing the crib in homes, in workplaces, in meeting places, is still alive and is even being rediscovered. Today too, may this genuine witness of Christian faith also be able to offer all men and women of good will an eloquent icon of the Father's infinite love for us all. May the hearts of children and adults still be able to feel wonder before him.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Virgin Mary and St Joseph help us to live the Mystery of Christmas with renewed gratitude to the Lord. In the midst of the frenetic activity of our day, may this Season give us some calm and joy and enable us to feel tangibly the goodness of our God, who became a Child to save us and to give new encouragement and light on our journey. This is my wish for a holy and happy Christmas: I address it with affection to all of you present here, to your families, in particular to the sick and the suffering, as well as to your communities and your loved ones.

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I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. To all of you, and especially the children, I offer my heartfelt good wishes for a serene and joy-filled Christmas!

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