



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 17 December 2003

Reflection on Advent

"The kingdom of God is at hand!"

1. *"Know that the kingdom of God is at hand; be sure that he will not delay"*. These words from today's Liturgy express the atmosphere of our anxious and prayerful preparation for the Christmas celebrations near at hand.

Advent keeps alive our expectation of Christ who will come to visit us with his salvation, fully establishing his Kingdom of justice and peace. The annual evocation of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem renews in believers' hearts the certainty that God keeps his promises. Advent is, therefore, *a powerful proclamation of hope*, which deeply touches our personal and communitarian experience.

2. Every man and woman dreams of a more just and supportive world where a dignified standard of life and peaceful coexistence harmonize relations between individuals and peoples. All too often, however, this is not the case. Obstacles, disputes and difficulties of various kinds burden our life and sometimes almost overwhelm it. The strength and courage required to strive for good risk yielding to evil, which seems at times to have the upper hand. It is especially at these moments that hope comes to our rescue. The mystery of Christmas, which we will relive in a few days' time, assures us that God is the *Emmanuel - God-with-us*. This is why we must never feel alone. He is close to us, he became one of us, born from the virginal womb of Mary. He shared our pilgrimage on earth, guaranteeing us the attainment of that joy and peace to which we aspire from the depths of our being.

3. The season of Advent focuses on a second element of hope which more generally concerns the meaning and value of life. We often ask ourselves: who are we, where are we going, what is the

meaning of all we do on earth, what awaits us after death?

There are, certainly, good and honest objectives: the search for greater material well-being, the pursuit of ever more advanced social, scientific and economic goals, a better fulfilment of personal expectations and those of the community. But do these goals suffice to satisfy the most intimate aspirations of our soul?

Today's Liturgy invites us to *broaden our vision* and to contemplate the Wisdom of God that comes from the Most High and is able to reach the ends of the world, disposing all things "with gentleness and strength" (cf. *Responsorial Antiphon*).

From the Christian people springs forth spontaneously the invocation: "Come, Lord, and make no delay".

4. Lastly, a third characteristic element of Christian hope deserves emphasis, as the season of Advent makes quite clear. Advent and especially Christmas are a reminder to the person who rises above daily affairs and seeks communion with God that *it was God who took the initiative* of coming to meet him. In becoming a child, God assumed our human nature and established once and for all his covenant with the whole of humanity.

We can thus conclude that the meaning of Christian hope, presented anew by Advent, *is that of confident expectation, of hardworking willingness and joyful openness* to the encounter with the Lord. He came to Bethlehem to remain with us for ever.

Let us therefore nourish these days of immediate preparation for the Birth of Christ with the light and warmth of hope, dear brothers and sisters. This is the wish I offer to you here present and to your loved ones. I entrust it to the motherly intercession of Mary, Model and Pillar of our hope.

A good Advent Season and a Happy Christmas to you all!

To the English-speaking visitors

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including the groups from Australia and the United States. I wish you a joyful preparation for Christmas. Upon you and your families I invoke the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ who comes among us. Happy Christmas!

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Lastly, I thank the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds* for coming to this meeting. A few

days before Christmas, I hope that this solemn feast will bring comfort and hope to everyone.

The Christmas tree in St Peter's Square

I now greet the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I offer you a special greeting, dear faithful of the Valle d'Aosta, together with your Pastor, Bishop Giuseppe Anfossi, and the civil Authorities who have accompanied you. I always remember with deep gratitude your cordial hospitality during my Visits to the beautiful mountains of your Region, to which I feel deeply united. Today you have come to offer me the large Christmas tree set up in St Peter's Square, and the trees that stand in this hall, in the Apostolic Palace and in other parts of the Vatican. They are a gift from your Autonomous Region of the Valle d'Aosta! Thank you! I am especially grateful to those who have made possible this great tribute to Christmas that will remind visitors and pilgrims of the birth of Jesus, Light of the world.