

Let Us Go with Joy to Meet the Lord

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from a homily dated November 30, 1974

Let me first say a few words about the meaning of the Advent season that we are entering this Sunday and that marks the beginning of the liturgical year.

In the first place we obviously need to consider its historical (or, if you prefer, chronological) significance. Advent carries our minds back to the first human events, which also marked the starting point of the history of salvation, which led to Christ.

Advent is the equivalent of this historico-chronological period of waiting for his coming and also of the unfolding of the mystery of Christ — in the first place of the Incarnation — inasmuch as this season brings us back to his hidden origins.

However, we can find other meanings in Advent. In the structure of Christianity it can be taken as indicating the deepest level.

Christianity is the religion of the coming of God, of his breaking through into human history and life — an aspect which makes it stand out from other religions.

Islam is undoubtedly a religion of God's presence in the world as Creator; it is a religion of transcendence. The religions of the Far East, which are religions of the absence of God, are also, in quite a different way, affirmations of his absolute transcendence.

Maybe we need such affirmations so that awareness of absolute transcendence, which mystics possess in the fuller sense, can be communicated to us who live in faith in the Lord's coming, in that coming which is a fact. Faith encounters the historical fact.

After these introductory remarks, let us give further consideration to two phrases from today's liturgy, because they can help us to live this Sunday in a more interior way.

The first is the invocation, "Let us go with joy to meet the Lord," which the Church purposely places at the very beginning of the liturgical year. Let us go with joy to meet Christ. This describes the atmosphere of the mystery of the Incarnation and of Christmas, and also that of the period of waiting for him, which the Church enters on the first Sunday of Advent. All this finds its meaning and confirmation in each one of us.

We all know that meeting with our Lord is the source of joy in the emotional sense of which Christmas and Advent tradition is full. However, it is chiefly so in its true, existential sense, according to which the greatest joy is everything linked to its end. And for the human person the end is the encounter with God. The person matures, is purified, and reaches self-realization in this encounter.

All the uncertainty of our existence, which has its own built-in limits and is also limited by its actual situation, recedes only in the meeting with the Supreme. This is our hope — our eschatological hope. Eschatological hope is verified along the way, so that we can state that the Church's call to go with joy to meet the Lord hides a deep meaning. A child looking forward to Christmas in his own way can identify with this call, just as an adult who has experienced many things can.

The second expression I want to consider from today's liturgy are the words of the Apostle Paul: "You know what hour it is" (Romans 13:11). When everything seems to be turned to the future, so that we are almost torn from the present, the Church uses the apostle's words to bring us to a halt, almost as if it were saying: "Advent is the present moment: not tomorrow, but today; not later, but now." And what deep truth there is in these words!

This makes Christianity the religion of the Lord's coming, inasmuch as, while waiting for the Lord's coming, we actually experience it. His coming unceasingly fills and satisfies our "now."

Thanks to this factor, we live with the hope of eschatological fullness; we live Advent not only in the perspective of the liturgical year, but also in the perspective of the entire existence of the individual, each nation and all humanity. The moment which we are living and which we must "know" is maybe very similar to the moment described in today's gospel reading (Luke 21:25-33), so that it too gives rise to much reflection, some of it deeply pessimistic and fearful of catastrophe. We are right to wonder about the forms our civilization or world should take and with it the Church, to which through its past it is so deeply bound and of which it is the expression.

However, these reflections would carry us far afield to theories about the world and its evolution, and, even though such matters may be of deep concern to us in a different way, we must leave them in order to return to the simplicity of the word of God which calls us today, just as it has done for centuries, to go with joy to meet the Lord. This is a deep truth, both because of its simplicity and because of its clarity — and maybe not only for the believer but also in a certain sense for each person who seeks it.

I would urge you to strive to "know what hour it is," because this hour is also the time of the Lord's coming. Indeed, since God came each hour has been full of his coming.

My dear brothers and sisters, I should like to take the invocation from today's liturgy as the key phrase for our gathering, since every meeting is in a certain sense such an "hour." Let us try to understand its meaning and see how it can be full of God's coming.

I think that if we begin like this we shall be able to receive from this first moment, this first day of Advent, the sanctifying fruits of grace which are destined for each one of us and for us all as a specific community in this specific age. Let us pray for this while participating in the Eucharistic liturgy.