



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION WITH THE NEW CARDINALS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Saint Peter's Basilica

First Sunday of Advent, 29 November 2020

[Multimedia]

Today's readings propose two key words for the Advent season: *closeness* and *watchfulness*. God's closeness and our watchfulness. The prophet Isaiah says that God is close to us, while in the Gospel Jesus urges us to keep watch in expectation of his return.

Closeness. Isaiah begins by speaking personally to God: "You, O Lord, are our father" (63:16). "Never has anyone heard", he continues, "[of] any God, other than you, who has done so much for those who trust in him" (cf. 64:3). We are reminded of the words of Deuteronomy: who is like the Lord our God, so *close* to us whenever we call upon him? (cf. 4:7). Advent is the season for *remembering* that closeness of God who came down to dwell in our midst. The prophet goes on to ask God to draw close to us once more: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Is 64:1). We prayed for this in today's responsorial psalm: "Turn again... come to save us" (Ps 80:15.3). We often begin our prayers with the invocation: "God, come to my assistance". The first step of faith is to tell God that we need him, that we need him to be *close* to us.

This is also the first message of Advent and the liturgical year: we need to recognize God's closeness and to say to him: "Come close to us once more!" God wants to draw close to us, but he will not impose himself; it is up to us to keep saying to him: "Come!" This is our Advent prayer: "Come!" Advent reminds us that Jesus came among us and will come again at the end of time. Yet we can ask what those two comings mean, if he does not also come into our lives today? So let us invite him. Let us make our own the traditional Advent prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). The Book of Revelation ends with this prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus". We can say that prayer at the beginning of each day and repeat it frequently, before our meetings, our studies and our work,

before making decisions, in every more important or difficult moment in our lives: *Come, Lord Jesus!* It is a little prayer, yet one that comes from the heart. Let us say it in this Advent season. Let us repeat it: “Come, Lord Jesus!”

If we ask Jesus to come close to us, we will train ourselves to be *watchful*. Today Mark’s Gospel presented us with the end of Jesus’ final address to his disciples, which can be summed up in two words: “Be watchful!” The Lord repeats these words four times in five verses (cf. *Mk* 13:33-35.37). It is important to remain watchful, because one great mistake in life is to get absorbed in a thousand things and not to notice God. Saint Augustine said: “*Timeo Iesum transeuntem*” (*Sermons*, 88, 14, 13), “I fear that Jesus will pass by me unnoticed”. Caught up in our own daily concerns (how well we know this!), and distracted by so many vain things, we risk losing sight of what is essential. That is why today the Lord repeats: “*To all, I say: be watchful!*” (*Mk* 13:37). Be watchful, attentive.

Having to be watchful, however, means it is now night. We are not living in broad daylight, but awaiting the dawn, amid darkness and weariness. The light of day will come when we shall be with the Lord. Let us not lose heart: the light of day will come, the shadows of night will be dispelled, and the Lord, who died for us on the cross, will arise to be our judge. Being watchful in expectation of his coming means not letting ourselves be overcome by discouragement. *It is to live in hope*. Just as before our birth, our loved ones expectantly awaited our coming into the world, so now Love in person awaits us. If we are awaited in Heaven, why should we be caught up with earthly concerns? Why should we be anxious about money, fame, success, all of which will pass away? Why should we waste time complaining about the night, when the light of day awaits us? Why should we look for “patrons” to help advance our career? All these things pass away. Be watchful, the Lord tells us.

Staying awake is not easy; it is really quite hard. At night, it is natural to sleep. Even Jesus’s disciples did not manage to stay awake when told to stay awake “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn” (cf. v. 35). Those were the very times they were not awake: in the evening, at the Last Supper, they betrayed Jesus; at midnight, they dozed off; at the cock’s crow, they denied him; in the morning, they let him be condemned to death. They did not keep watch. They fell asleep. But that same drowsiness can also overtake us. There is a dangerous kind of sleep: it is *the slumber of mediocrity*. It comes when we forget our first love and grow satisfied with indifference, concerned only for an untroubled existence. Without making an effort to love God daily and awaiting the newness he constantly brings, we become mediocre, lukewarm, worldly. And this slowly eats away at our faith, for faith is the very opposite of mediocrity: it is ardent desire for God, a bold effort to change, the courage to love, constant progress. Faith is not water that extinguishes flames, it is fire that burns; it is not a tranquilizer for people under stress, it is a love story for people in love! That is why Jesus above all else detests lukewarmness (cf. *Rev* 3:16). God clearly disdains the lukewarm.

How can we rouse ourselves from the slumber of mediocrity? With *the vigilance of prayer*. When we pray, we light a candle in the darkness. Prayer rouses us from the tepidity of a purely horizontal existence and makes us lift our gaze to higher things; it makes us attuned to the Lord. Prayer allows God to be close to us; it frees us from our solitude and gives us hope. Prayer is vital for life: just as we cannot live without breathing, so we cannot be Christians without praying. How much we need Christians who keep watch for those who are slumbering, worshipers who intercede day and night, bringing before Jesus, the light of the world, the darkness of history. How much we need worshipers. We have lost something of our sense of adoration, of standing in silent adoration before the Lord. This is mediocrity, lukewarmness.

There is also another kind of interior slumber: *the slumber of indifference*. Those who are indifferent see everything the same, as if it were night; they are unconcerned about those all around them. When everything revolves around us and our needs, and we are indifferent to the needs of others, night descends in our hearts. Our hearts grow dark. We immediately begin to complain about everything and everyone; we start to feel victimized by everyone and end up brooding about everything. It is a vicious circle. Nowadays, that night seems to have fallen on so many people, who only demand things for themselves, and are blind to the needs of others.

How do we rouse ourselves from the slumber of indifference? With *the watchfulness of charity*. To awaken us from that slumber of mediocrity and lukewarmness, there is the watchfulness of prayer. To rouse us from that slumber of indifference, there is the watchfulness of charity. Charity is the beating heart of the Christian: just as one cannot live without a heartbeat, so one cannot be a Christian without charity. Some people seem to think that being compassionate, helping and serving others is for losers. Yet these are the only things that win us the victory, since they are already aiming towards the future, the day of the Lord, when all else will pass away and love alone will remain. It is by works of mercy that we draw close to the Lord. This is what we asked for in today's opening prayer: "Grant [us]... the resolve *to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds* at his coming". The resolve to run forth to meet Christ with good works. Jesus is coming, and the road to meet him is clearly marked: it passes through works of charity.

Dear brothers and sisters, praying and loving: that is what it means to be watchful. When the Church worships God and serves our neighbour, she does not live in the night. However weak and weary, she journeys towards the Lord. Let us now call out to him. Come, Lord Jesus, we need you! Draw close to us. You are the light. Rouse us from the slumber of mediocrity; awaken us from the darkness of indifference. Come, Lord Jesus, take our distracted hearts and make them watchful. Awaken within us the desire to pray and the need to love.