1. The Parousia of the Lord

An expectation without hesitation

This year, the Advent meditations introduce us to a unique time: while we enter the new liturgical year, we also approach the conclusion of the ordinary Jubilee, which has set us all on a journey as pilgrims of Hope. On 6 January, the Solemnity of the Epiphany, Pope Leo will close the Holy Door opened by Pope Francis, a sign of the passing of the witness that every baptized person has been able to experience this year, accepting the invitation to renew their baptismal life.

Advent is the time in which the Church rekindles hope, contemplating not only the first coming of the Lord, but above all his return at the end of times. The ancient apses depicted the Coming Christ, with his right hand raised in blessing and the Gospel in his left: a powerful visual reminder of the certainty of his promise and the value of our waiting.

This liturgical time reminds us that we are not lost wayfarers, but pilgrims journeying towards a homeland. The invocation "*Marana-tha*", "Come, Lord" – is the confident song that accompanies our steps. However, as the Apostle Peter recalls, this hope does not make us passive spectators: we are called to wait, and at the same time hasten the coming of the Lord with serene and active vigilance.

1. Recognizing grace

Before inviting us to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation, the liturgy of Advent always confronts us with Jesus' eschatological discourses, in which the Master himself foretold his Parousia, the glorious day of his coming at the end of time. In fact, only the evangelist Matthew uses this Greek term (*parousía*), which has a dual meaning: "presence" and "coming", similar to the visit of a sovereign who makes himself present in a remote province of his kingdom.

Matthew refers to it four times, all in Chapter 24, where he summarizes Jesus' teachings on the future or "last" things (*ta eschata*), offering us important guidance on how to walk with confidence and without anxiety towards our definitive encounter with God. The discourse opens with the announcement of the destruction of the Temple and continues by describing a time marked by wars, famines and upheavals which, however, do not yet coincide with the end. In the midst of this difficult scenario, false Christs and false prophets will arise, capable of confusing many, while iniquity will cause love to grow cold. It will be then that the disciples will be called to bear witness, accepting the tribulations with meekness due to the Gospel: only in this way will his word reach all nations. After a great tribulation, cosmic signs will announce the coming of the Son of Man, who will gather his elect. Since the end of this day

remains unknown, the only possible attitude is to watch, like faithful servants awaiting the return of their master, without being surprised by sleep or deception.

Towards the end of the discourse, Jesus draws a comparison between the expectation of his coming and the days of Noah, when the whole earth experienced the universal flood.

> As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man (Matthew 24: 37-39).

The scenario in which the flood came about was punctuated by ordinary actions, similar to those we find ourselves doing every day: eating and drinking, making life choices and carrying them out. However, while everyone was carrying out these normal activities, only one man – Noah – had invested his time in building a means of salvation to shelter his family and all the animals that would be saved from the impending flood. And the other human beings? They did not notice anything, says Jesus.

What does this reminder mean? How can it be a warning for us too? What do we need to be aware of, without distracting ourselves from the issues we face every day?

The answer could take many directions. We must realize that the time in which we are called to be witnesses of Christ is characterized by new and complex challenges: the Church is called to remain a sacrament of salvation in an era of change in which, as theologians and sociologist remind us, has profoundly transformed the way we believe and belong. Peace remains a mirage in many regions unless longstanding injustices and wounded memories find healing, while in Western culture the sense of transcendence is weakened, crushed by the idols of efficiency, wealth and technology. The advent of artificial intelligence amplifies the temptation of a human being without limits and without transcendence.

But realizing all this is not enough to convert the heart. It is necessary to recognize something more important and decisive: the direction in which the Kingdom of God continues to move within history. This is the perspective we can rediscover by drawing on the prophetic capacity we received at Baptism. Jesus repeatedly rebuked the people of his time precisely for their inability to grasp God's action in history: "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56).

What should our generation – like every generation – realize when we raise our eyes to heaven and contemplate the mystery of God now revealed in

Christ? We actually know the answer well, and during the days of Christmas the liturgy reminds us of it regularly.

> For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the. Glory of our great God and Saviour (Titus 2:11-13).

This is what we must increasingly realize: God's grace, that gift of universal salvation which the Church humbly celebrates and offers, so that human life may be raised up from the burden of sin and freed from the fear of death. We, the ministers of the Church, speak of this grace and live it every day. However, we must recognize that the gestures of faith to which we are accustomed, to which we try to remain faithful, do not only have the effect of nurturing our relationship with God. Over time, our hearts risk losing momentum and vigour, to the point of losing our sense of wonder at the grace of God that we are called to enjoy and bear witness to. This is the risk of faith: becoming so familiar with God that we take him for granted, forgetting that, ever since the days of Noah, he has been "patient (*makrothymia*)" with us and with everyone.

This is what every generation must realize, carefully evaluating the wonderful and dramatic time in which life always unfolds: the mystery of a God who, drawing from his infinite love, continues to stand before his creation with unshakeable trust, in the expectation that better days can – and must – still come.

2. Eliminating evil

To rediscover the face of a God who patiently accompanies his wounded creation, the account of the universal flood (Genesis 6-9) remains an inexhaustible source of light and revelation.

> The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

The story begins with a God who has become disenchanted: human beings, that creature that combined the traits of earth and sky, failed to bring together the ingredients with which they had been moulded. They retain some outward resemblance to their Creator, but their actions no longer reflect the capacity to love. A word of falsehood has found a place in his heart, and now man's life produces nothing but evil.

It is an analysis that, at first sight, appears very stark and perhaps even overly pessimistic. Yet it is useful, because it rebalances the often naive way in which we moderns view the mystery of evil. While we delude ourselves that we can overcome it simply by perfecting or evolving ourselves, we should

remember that our humanity not only needs to be fulfilled, but also – and above all – to be saved. Evil must not simply be forgiven: it must be erased, so that life can finally flourish in its truth and beauty.

> The Lord said: "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Genesis 6:7).

In God's intention to wipe humanity off the face of the earth, we should not see the beginning of a destructive plan on God's part, but rather the urgency to do everything so as not to give up on the plan of love that had given rise to creation. God decides to "wipe the slate clean" precisely because he does not resign himself to the evidence of evil. After all, if he really wanted to destroy what he had made and start over, he could have done so freely, without even feeling the need to share his intentions with anyone.

By making explicit his intention to destroy, God declares his attempt to reshape the world that sprang from the imagination of his heart and the ingenuity of his hands. The same bold and stubborn passion will animate the heart of the Lord Jesus when he weeps before Jerusalem before his passion (cf. Luke 19:41-44), or when he tries until the end to prevent Judas from succumbing to the deadly temptation of betrayal: "It would be better for that man if he had not been born!" (Mark 14:21).

In the logic of "cancel culture" in which we are immersed, for us, cancelling risks becoming only the gesture by which we eliminate everything that does not immediately align with our desires or our sensibilities. However, to cancel does not only mean this, nor can it be reduced to the attempt to free ourselves from what appears to be burdensome about others.

Every day we cancel many things, without feeling guilty and without committing any evil. We delete messages, useless files, mistakes in a document, stains, traces, debts. On the contrary, many of these gestures are necessary to help our relationships mature and make the world livable. It is no coincidence that the prophets use this verb not to threaten, but to console Israel, reminding them of God's infinite mercy.

> He will swallow up (*cancel out*) death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 25:8).

> I, I am he who *blots out* your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (Isaiah, 43:25)

> I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 44:22).

The verb “to erase”, “to cancel out”, also expresses well what man, aware of his own fragility, asks God to do to the wounded flesh of his humanity, when he recognizes his need to be healed and strengthened again.

> Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy *blot out* my transgressions. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities (Psalms 51:1,9).

Every time the Lord looks down from heaven to scrutinize the inhabitants of the world, we should always think that he does so in the hope of finding a good reason to continue supporting the plan of his creation. Thus reads the verse of a psalm: “The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God” (Psalm 14:2). And, in fact, one man proves himself capable of raising his eyes to heaven, even though circumstances do not seem very favourable: Noah, about whom an interesting detail is noted.

> But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).

Although wickedness on earth was great, we discover that someone had not ceased to seek God's face and to question his will. Someone had realized that humanity was living under a patient heaven. Noah was aware of God's grace. Finally, the Most High found someone to whom he could entrust his plan: to cancel everything out and start again, without, however, recreating the fundamental conditions of a plan that remains valid and possible. The attempt is very daring, because it is necessary to eliminate everything without giving in to the temptation to start again from scratch. But how can one wipe out a reality without cancelling or altering it?

The story is well-known: God asks Noah to build an ark, and indicates to him the precise measurements it will have to have. Scholars recognize that these measurements refer to the proportions of the temple in Jerusalem. This is no coincidence. These stories were composed during the exile in Babylon, when Israel was far from Jerusalem without a place to encounter its God. Thus, the ark becomes a symbol of that lost temple and of the desire to rebuild it.

But the message is even more profound and relevant: the text of the flood tells us that, to truly wipe out evil from the face of the earth, it is not enough to change human structures. It is necessary to rebuild the “Lord’s temple”, that is, to restore the correct image of God in the heart of man and on the face of the earth. Only when man returns to living before the true face of God can history truly change.

For this reason, the ark is not merely a boat: it is the permanent hope of every generation. While we always seek solutions starting from the earth, the story of the flood reminds us that life flourishes again only when we rebuild heaven, to the extent that we put God back at the centre. It is not surprising, then, that

Jesus was harsh when he entered the temple and found it transformed into a marketplace: without a true image of God, even religion degrades.

The flood, therefore, is not simple destruction, but a transition of re-creation through a moment of de-creation. The waters mix again, as in the beginning, not to annihilate the world, but to reopen to humanity the possibility of understanding more deeply the plan of life desired by God. It is a temporary change of the rules of the game, to save the very game that God had inaugurated with confidence.

> He blotted out every living thing that was upon the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the Ark. And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days (Genesis 7:23-24).

Everything is swept away and wiped out. It happens in nature, when a sudden cataclysm changes the face of a territory forever. It also happens in our lives, when an unexpected event, an illness or a bereavement suddenly disrupts the shape of our days. What if moments of great destabilisation, when all balances are shaken and seem to collapse, were actually part of a larger process of transformation? After the flood, the biblical text does not describe a simple return to normality: the slow receding of the waters occurs in response to a precise and decisive gesture, which becomes the true centre of the story.

> But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided (Genesis 8:1).

Finally, the portents become clear and suspicions dissolve: God has not forgotten humanity; on the contrary, he wanted to remember that humanity still has the capacity to respond to his voice. Thus, after burying everything under the waters, the Lord now sets about drying everything up so that life can begin again soon. The flood was not a project of death, therefore, but a paradoxical renewal of life. When the waters finally calm and recede, Noah receives the order to leave the ark together with his wife, his sons, his sons' wives and all the animals.

After attempting to "wipe out" the world – without succeeding, however – the Lord seems to have clarified his ideas about what he can expect from man and what he himself is willing to put on the table in his covenant with him.

> This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh (Genesis 9: 12-16).

The sign that God places between heaven and earth, normally understood to mean a "rainbow", is in reality the instrument of war used by an archer (in Hebrew *qeshet*). While this etymology takes away some of the poetry from the play of colours that enchants us after a storm, it adds nuances that help us better understand what happened during the flood. Not so much on earth, but deep in God's heart.

At the end of his attempt to flood the entire world, the Lord lays down his weapons before man and makes a solemn declaration of non-violence. It may seem like a bold metaphor, almost inappropriate when speaking of God and the way his grace manifests itself. And yet, after millennia of history and evolution, humanity is still far from knowing how to imitate it. How far are we from knowing how to lay down our guns and hang our bows of war on the wall? The earth continues to be torn apart by atrocious and endless conflicts, which give no respite to so many weak and defenceless people.

It is therefore worth asking ourselves: what really reassures us? A message of love – beautiful, yes, but sometimes a little abstract – or the concrete decision of those who, despite having the power to hurt us, freely choose not to do so? If we leave aside a naive and romantic idea of relationships, we must recognize that the image of a bow hanging in the clouds can be a very high manifestation of love, perhaps the most certain and reassuring.

A warrior who has appeased his anger represents, better than any other image, the kind of ally we would like to have by our side: someone who, despite being able to rage against us, chooses not to do so because he understands that only by accepting us as we are can our alliance be lasting, true and free.

3. Dedicating oneself to salvation

The flood has ended, and many things on earth have been wiped out, especially a certain image of God. In order to continue believing in us, the Lord became angry, sent water down from his heaven, and flooded the entire earth, but not before "saving" a remnant from which to resume the thread of a more authentic and fruitful human generation. Then he laid down his weapons, declared peace, and remained with empty hands before his work, to regain the right and the joy of continuing to shape it. The only weapons that remain in the history of the world will be those that man chooses to build and use whenever he feels persecuted, discriminated against, and oppressed. God laid down his weapons and did so forever, accepting the risk of a creation that is certainly freer, but also more exposed to the risk of evil and violence.

In this great event of the flood, the first Christians saw a foreshadowing of the mystery of Christ and his cross, the definitive sign of the covenant between heaven and earth, by contemplating which every human being can rediscover the immense value of his existence before God.

> Baptism, which corresponds to this [water], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21).

The flood waters have receded, for ever. For us Christians, water is now the symbol of the extraordinary possibility of welcoming the life of Christ into ourselves, in whose name we can be new creatures through Baptism. However, this new existence needs to be freely accepted and lived responsibly, keeping watch over our personal adherence to the Gospel. For this reason, Jesus, in his eschatological discourse, after mentioning the days of Noah, concludes with a final recommendation.

> Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Matthew 24:42-44).

The theme of ignorance regarding the day and hour of the glorious return of the Son of man has always raised questions in the history of the Church. The early communities lived in fervent expectation of the Lord's imminent return. Over the centuries, the Church came to understand that this horizon needed to be expanded, placed in a broader and still indecipherable time frame. After two thousand years, we find ourselves in almost the opposite situation: the expectation has diminished so much that it has sometimes given way to a subtle resignation about its actual fulfilment. If enthusiasm and anxiety abounded in the beginning, today a weary vigilance, tempted by discouragement, often prevails.

An ancient and anonymous Church Father, commenting on the Gospel of Matthew, tried to reflect on why we are called to live without knowing precisely the day of our death or the day of Christ's return.

> Why is the date of death hidden from us? Clearly, this is done so that we may always do good, since we can expect to die at any moment. The date of Christ's second coming is hidden from the world for the same reason, so that every generation may live in expectation of Christ's return[1].

Saint John Chrysostom expresses a similar idea:

> If … men knew when they were to die, they would surely strive earnestly at that hour. In order that they may strive, not at that hour only, therefore he tells them not either the common hour, or the hour of each, desiring them to be ever looking for this, that they may always be striving[2].

[1] ANONYMOUS, *Incomplete work on Matthew*, Homily 51.
[2] JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 77,2-3.

The patristic tradition is unanimous: the time in which we live must be used wisely, to do good in a stable – not occasional – way and to await without hesitation the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, remaining faithful to the grace of his Gospel. The vigilance to which the season of Advent exhorts us, therefore, is first and foremost over ourselves, as the Apostle Paul recommends to the elders of Ephesus: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts of the Apostles 20:28).

Those who, in the body of Christ, carry out a ministry for others should never forget the invitation that the apostle addresses to all the 'saints' of Philippi, together with the bishops and deacons: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). In a complex time, filled with urgencies, such as ours, we must be vigilant against two great temptations that can affect both the Church in the person of her ministers and every baptized person: forgetting the need to be saved and thinking that we can regain consensus by taking care of the outward appearance of our image and reducing the radical nature of the Gospel.

As in the days of Noah, the first form of salvation to which we must devote ourselves does not consist of fulfilling or organizing pastoral activities, but in returning to the joy – and also the hardship – of following, without taming Christ's word. Only this form of vigilance makes us sentinels that, in the night of the world, humbly maintain the confidence that soon the Morning Star will rise, that star that never sets, whose light is capable of illuminating every person. A holy monk of the last century, Thomas Merton, expressed in a few words this state of vigilance to which Advent leads us with strength and gentleness.

> We are exiles in the far end of solitude,
> living as listeners,
> Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
> Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

Let us pray

O God, who sent your Son in our flesh to gather all peoples into your kingdom, grant us a vigilant spirit, so that, walking in your ways of peace, we may go forth to meet the Lord when he comes in glory. He is God, and lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.

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