

17–24 December 2022

The Advent 'O antiphons'



We all love the countdown to Christmas with Advent calendars and so on. Monks in the medieval Church prepared for Christmas by using different antiphons during their many services. These antiphons are sentences and responses to help delineate the different seasons of the year. They are called 'antiphons'—literally, the 'sounds before' a verse or sentence. And advent had its own set.

Each of the last seven days of Advent has a different antiphon at the beginning and at the end of the Magnificat during the service of Evening Prayer. They are addressed to God, calling for Him to come as teacher and deliverer, with a rich tapestry of scriptural titles and pictures that describe His saving work in Christ. We do not know when and by whom the antiphons were first composed, but they were first seen in written form from a manuscript dating from the late AD 400s and had assumed their present form by the eighth century.

We have a musical form of them in the hymn *O come O come Emmanuel*.

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The O antiphons

17 December—O Sapientia ('O Wisdom, teacher')

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other mightily,
and sweetly ordering all things:

Come and teach us the way of prudence. *Cf. Ecclesiasticus 24:3; Wisdom 8:1*

18 December—O Adonai (O deliverer')

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush
and gave him the law on Sinai:

Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm. *cf. Exodus 3:2; 24:12*

19 December—O Radix Jesse ('O root of Jesse')

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths,
to you the nations will make their prayer:

Come and deliver us, and delay no longer. *cf. Isaiah 11:10; 45:14; 52:15; Romans 15:12*

20 December—O Clavis David ('O key of David')

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;
you open and no one can shut;
you shut and no one can open:
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

cf. Isaiah 22:22; 42:7

21 December—O Oriens ('O morning star')

O Morning Star,
splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness
and the shadow of death.

cf. Malachi 4:2

22 December—O Rex Gentium ('O King of the Nations')

O King of the nations, and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:

Come and save the human race,
which you fashioned from clay.

cf. Isaiah 28:16; Ephesians 2:14

23 December—O Emmanuel ('O Emmanuel')

O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:

Come and save us, O Lord our God.

cf. Isaiah 7:14

1

**O Wisdom, who came from the mouth of the Most High,
and reaches from one end to another,
mightily and sweetly ordering all things:
come and teach us the way of love**

We start with a meditation on the overarching plan of God.

In the intertestamental period there were some writings that took the idea of the wisdom of God as seen in Proverbs 2 and 3 and personified it even more—in parallel with the idea of the Logos as seen in John 1:1,2.

The point of this part of the prayer is that God who is most high and majestic beyond our imaginings is also active in the world. He sees all things from one end to another, and more than that he orders all things—he is in charge and working his purposes and plans out in this world of ours.

- It's not chaos but order.
- It's not chance but purpose.
- However much it might seem out of control there is a plan.
- History is HIS-story.

And the reason God bothers with us small insignificant people lost in a wide universe? Love. We matter to him because he loves. He acts for the world out of love. The way he does it is in love.

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.

O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,

O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,

Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything. *Malcolm Guite*

2

**Adonai and leader of the house of Israel,
who did appear in the bush to Moses in a flame of fire,
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.**

Now we start in on some of the details of that plan and purpose. God chooses to reveal himself to Moses and through him call the enslaved people of Israel to follow him.

In Exodus that first revelation is in fire—God is glorious and majestic and scary and awesome but out of love reveals that majestic power to Moses in the bush that is not consumed by his presence. This high mighty God can be known without it destroying us. And he rescues the Israelites, makes them a nation, and gives them the Law on Mount Sinai through Moses. The high God is still scary because the Law reveals how much we fall short of his purity and so how much in danger we are. Moses has to act as the go-between for a people wary of the Majesty.

- He's mighty but can be known without consuming us
- He's interested in not just distant overseeing but wants to get close to us
- He calls a people out of slavery and reveals himself to them
- He gives them a calling and the Law—to reveal his nature
- We learn that approaching him without help is dangerous—but he offers that help.
- But it starts with redemption and specific action by the High God.

God reaches out from his majesty and might to our littleness and weakness. He acts to show himself to the world by calling a people, rescuing them from slavery and showing them his glory. He acts to save and rescue.

Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue,
Unseeable, you gave yourself away,
The Adonai, the Tetragramaton
Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face,
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth.
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf. *Malcolm Guite*

3

**O Root of Jesse, who stands as a sign to all people,
at whom kings shut their mouths,
and whom the Gentiles seek:
Come and deliver us and tarry not.**

God continues his revelation and work by choosing the line of the true King of Israel.

Jesse's family is chosen, and the youngest and least impressive son is anointed King. And the promise is that through this line, from these roots will come the King of God's choosing, the one who brings in God's complete rule and plan. A sign for all people, a king above all earthly majesty and rule, and the one who will draw even the Gentiles under his banner. Yet he is still of the Root of Jesse, still seemingly weak and insignificant but in him is the majesty not of this world but of God Himself.

- He is the hope of the world—God's rule is come
- In him the nations can trust—despite not fitting their ideas of majesty
- God's Kingdom come

God continues to work through odd people. Moses the old man living with regrets and failures—the killer. Now David the youngest and weakest available son of Jesse—adulterer, murderer, failure as a family man. From these unprepossessing beginnings comes the King Incarnate!

Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.

I cry out for the key I threw away
That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.

O come again, come quickly, set me free
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key. *Malcolm Guite*

4

**O Key of David, and sceptre of the house of Israel,
who opens and no man shuts,
and shuts and no man opens:
Come and bring the prisoners out of gaol,
those that sit in darkness and the shadow of death.**

A key opens a door. And this great ruler comes with power to achieve extraordinary things in the lives of those who submit to his rule, who surrender.

What he opens remains open and vice versa. The way to God's presence is nailed open at the cross, and the way to condemnation and hell is nailed shut for us. Those imprisoned by circumstances, by harm done to them, by wounded bodies and wounded lives find in him a freedom that transcends their circumstances – that leaves them dancing not mourning. For those who live in the darkness of shame and loss, enslaved by their pasts, by their actions, or kept limited by others actions he offers Light that lifts them out of enslavement into new beginnings, that lifts them from shame. For those who live with the reality of death and loss and who know the fear and uncertainty of life, the dread of what is to come, and maybe the fear of physical death find the shadow lifts, hope has come, we are not defined by what has happened, has been done, to us but by the love and light and power of God's answer.

- Lives lifted from hopelessness to possibility.
- Those imprisoned, either in reality or by circumstances, find freedom.
- If we have been darkened by circumstance, by the actions of others, by death itself we find answers and a hope in this one from David's line.

The promised King brings release and freedom and hope to those entrapped by circumstances, by failures, by life and all its chaos and mess. Come, O come!

Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.
I cry out for the key I threw away

That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.
O come again, come quickly, set me free
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key. *Malcolm Guite*

5

**O Dayspring, brightness of the light everlasting,
and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those that sit in darkness
and the shadow of death.**

Light comes into our world and our lives.

Dayspring describes the dawn—there’s a moment when the hold of the dark is finally broken—the twilight may have held on to gloom but suddenly light banishes the darkness. Day dawns. The shadows of night are defeated. This coming Jesus is the Dayspring—shining God’s light into the darkness of the world. Being God’s light it also is the sun of righteousness: living in his light reveals our own darkness, the shadows in our life become more pronounced, our need for a saviour clearer, But it is also a light of hope because it reveals the way home, the way to safety, the way to freedom from fear of death

- Light everlasting offers us hope that the struggles of life are not the final word — there is hope.
- The sun of righteousness means an end to hiding—we are revealed to ourselves and to the Majesty. But looking to that light again means our failures and sins are not what defines our lives and future—we have a Saviour who offers us forgiveness and welcome. Remember the man on the cross who will be with Jesus today in Paradise!

Let us turn to the Light and welcome Him.

First light and then first lines along the east
To touch and brush a sheen of light on water
As though behind the sky itself they traced

The shift and shimmer of another river
Flowing unbidden from its hidden source;
The Day-Spring, the eternal Prima Vera.

Blake saw it too. Dante and Beatrice
Are bathing in it now, away upstream ...
So every trace of light begins a grace

In me, a beckoning. The smallest gleam
Is somehow a beginning and a calling;
‘Sleeper awake, the darkness was a dream
For you will see the Dayspring at your waking,
Beyond your long last line the dawn is breaking’.

Malcolm Guite

6

**O King of nations, and their desire;
the cornerstone who makes both one:
Come and save mankind,
whom you have formed of clay.**

Meditation

This Messiah is not just for the individual but for the world. We are formed from clay, from humble beginnings, from the earth and tend to earthly answers without hope beyond. All nations look for answers and struggle to find the right way to be, the right way to plan, the right future to aim for. Our coming King has answers that satisfy.

Make him the cornerstone on which we build our lives, our future, our hopes and dreams, our desires—and we find we have built our lives on solid ground.

He comes to save – not just from sin but from our foolish ways.

O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one,
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
or we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own. *Malcolm Guite*

7

**O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.**

Meditations

This coming King we long for is also 'God with us'. God himself acts, speaks himself into the humanity he has made, and turns the world upside down.

Grace that reaches our littleness. Love that gives without measure, counting the cost but reckoning that we are worth the effort and the literal blood sweat and tears. Mercy for our littleness and our frailty and our failures and our rebellion and our fallenness.

Hope of the nations but my hope too, their Saviour but O I am in need too. Come this Christmas to my life, my need, and be my Saviour.

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands. *Malcolm Guite*

The blessing

May God the Father, judge all-merciful,
make us worthy of a place in his kingdom.

May God the Son, coming among us in power,
reveal in our midst the promise of his glory.

May God the Holy Spirit make us steadfast in faith,
joyful in hope and constant in love

And the blessing of God the Almighty:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and remain with you always.

All Amen.