

**Wednesday 16—Wednesday 24 December 2020**

- To see service transcripts from previous weeks, please visit the page, <http://www.medlockhead.co.uk/resources/index.htm>
- The image above comes from an eleventh-century English manuscript *The Virgin and Child* (BL Add. 34890, f. 115).

All of us love counting down to Christmas: we have Advent calendars and Advent candles. That counting can get out of hand, hence the popular misconception that the ‘twelve days of Christmas’ counts the days *before* Christmas (in fact than start on Christmas Day and end with Epiphany—that’s why one old name for Epiphany is ‘Twelfth Night’).

Perhaps we obsess about marking time during Advent because it’s the darkest part of the darkest season of the year and we’re counting down until normality resumes. No wonder we celebrate Advent with light.

Monks and nuns in the early Church counted through the year with a special calendar. They also subdivided each day by attending seven daily services. To stop such services becoming repetitious, each element of each service was customised with its own sentences and responses. It was a bit like the way that today we have a Lectionary that tells us which Bible readings to say aloud in Church each Sunday.

We call many of these seasonal variables ‘antiphons’. This word literally means, ‘the sound before’—it occurs before a verse or sentence. All of us today employ the antiphon, ‘Praise to you O Lord’ before hearing the Gospel passage set for the day.

The words of an antiphon change according to the different seasons of the Church year, with different antiphons for Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, or Easter. The last seven days of Advent have their own antiphons which act like audible book-marks at the start and end of the Magnificat during a service of Evening Prayer.

The full text of each antiphon appears on page 4 **below**. Note their repeated use

of the imperative ‘Come!’ which symbolises our sense of longing for the second coming of the Messiah. Because they’re rather long, each also has a shorthand title.

By ancient tradition, we call these phrases for Advent ‘The O Antiphons’ or the ‘great Os’, because each begins with the particle ‘O’. These names are ancient and are part of a liturgical tradition going back to the very earliest days of the Church.

Each antiphon gives a different name or title to Christ. They help describe the person we expect to return as our Lord and Messiah. The magnificent theology they imply employs ancient images from the Bible for each refers to the prophecy of Isaiah. They draw their power from the messianic hopes that shows Jesus fulfilling not just the hopes in the Old Testament but our present-day hopes as well.

They start on 17 December and progress through to 22 December. They are,

- O Sapientia (*O Wisdom*) from the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1
- O Adonai (*O Lord*) from ‘as king he shall reign wisely’ in Jeremiah 23
- O Radix Jesse (*O Root of Jesse*) from ‘he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah’ in Luke 1
- O Clavis David (*O Key of David*) from ‘the Lord will give him the throne of his father David’ from Luke 1
- O Oriens (*O Dayspring*) from ‘the Lord, your God, is in your midst’ in Zephaniah 3
- O Rex Gentium (*O King of the Nations*) from ‘he has come to the help of his servant Israel’ in Luke 1
- O Emmanuel (*O King of the Nations*) from ‘and suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek’ in Malachi 3
- O morning star from ‘the dawn from on high shall break upon us’ in Luke 1

In fact, all of us have sung them (probably without knowing it). For example, the Advent hymn *O come, O come, Emmanuel* paraphrases them in a versified form.

The Great Os are important in two ways. First, each is a title for the coming Messiah. Exercises like the one below can help us as meditate on what Advent means.

Secondly, each refers to the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the coming of the Messiah. The Gospels are therefore addressing this sense of impending hope as well as celebrating the way Jesus had already come in his first incarnation. We can appropriate that sense of hope as we also look forward to an unknown future date.

Although they are clearly addressed to Jesus, these titles also speak of the kind of things all of us want but rarely (or ever) experience in this world: perfect wis-

dom, genuine peace, justice, true freedom, light in the darkness, companionship that will not fail us. Indeed, these ideas can touch a powerful emotional chord whether we believe these desires can be fulfilled by the promises of Advent or not.

Looked at these ways, the O Antiphons can become far more than a simple countdown to Christmas. In truth, most of us *are* impatient for Christmas to come so, into any sense of irritation or exasperation, so they encourage us to explore the source of our impatience and invite us to understand the nature of our own frustrated desires.

Part of the appeal of using the O Antiphons' therefore concerns the way they help express an our urgent longings. Maybe our longings and needs look different when expressed in ancient words, in stylised phrases, and in a context of liturgy.

As we countdown to Christmas through these last days of Advent, we look forward to the coming of Jesus as a babe and forward to his coming again as Lord and judge. And we ask the age-old yet modern question, 'Lord, for whom am I waiting?'

Exercise

Look at the O antiphon for the day and interrogate it. For example, for the first one, *O sapientia* (O wisdom), ask:

- In which way is Jesus a source of wisdom?
- How and where do the Gospels interpret that wisdom?
- What contrasting responses do we see in Jesus' friends and does when they see this wisdom displayed?
- In each case, how does this response change the way I look at the Christ child in a manger, and how does it change the way I await his second coming?

Further reading

<https://www.jesuit.org.uk/articles/o-antiphons-advent>

<https://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2015/12/the-anglo-saxon-o-antiphons-o-jerusalem.html>

<https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/the-o-antiphons-of-advent>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Antiphons

17 December – O Sapientia

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 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, 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 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,
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, 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, 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*

O come, O come, Emmanuel

1 O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

2 O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. Refrain

3 O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe. Refrain

4 O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,
unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave. Refrain

5 O come, O Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road
and bar the way to death's abode. Refrain

6 O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light. Refrain

7 O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace. Refrain