

# The 'O' Antiphons



Agency for Evangelisation  
and Catechesis  
Archdiocese of Southwark



# What are the 'O' Antiphons?



The 'O' Antiphons are the prayers of Advent, prayed since the 8th Century in the seven days before Christmas Eve. They make this time of preparation for the birth of Christ holy, allowing us the opportunity to meditate on Christ's coming and what it means for us. Each 'O' Antiphon addresses Christ with one of his Messianic titles. The texts are based on a composite of Old Testament Scripture texts many of which are also referenced in the New Testament.

## When are they prayed?

The 'O' Antiphons are prayed as part of the Divine Office of the

Church, which belongs to the whole People of God. They are recited at Evening prayer before and after the Magnificat, the great prayer of Mary in Luke 1: 46-55 when coming visit to Elizabeth her cousin she praised God for his wondrous deeds and favour.

If you attend Mass daily from the 17th December you will recognise them in the Liturgy of the Word. They were included after the 2nd Vatican Council as the Gospel Acclamation from the 17th-23rd December.

## What do they signify?

Advent is about the many ways in which the Lord comes to us.

He came historically at Bethlehem as a baby (see Luke 2:7). He will come again at the end of the world as Judge of the living and the dead. Throughout the liturgical year Jesus comes to us in the sacraments, most especially in the celebration of the Eucharist when Christ is present in the two-fold consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ; in the person of the priest, who is '*in persona Christi*' (in the person of Christ); in the proclamation of Holy Scripture and in the community gathered. Everyday we see Christ in the person of our neighbour, especially those who are in need of our help.



# 'O' Antiphons for the family



## Have a go!

As a class or a family, you could prepare an 'O' Antiphon House. This is a little cardboard house with nine hinged windows (one for each antiphon and two extra, one for Christmas Eve and the other for Christmas Day), each hiding the appropriate symbol for the 'O' Antiphon of the day then a picture of the Nativity. Each window can be opened in collective worship or at the end of family evening prayers, as the corresponding verse to 'O Come, Emmanuel' is sung or the text for each day is read (see over). You could bake biscuits as a family and decorate them with the symbols (see over) and distribute them as treats on the respective day. Another option would be to place the symbols on cardboard or wooden discs, day by day, on a stand or branch, similar to the way a Jesse tree works.

## Have a sing!

The song 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel' is simply a reworking of the seven 'O' Antiphons. When you sing it, you are joining Christians stretching back across centuries and spanning the whole of the earth who prayed, as all Christians do, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22:20)

Why not sing it together at home?

Traditional and Popular Hymns for Advent <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nX975125R-U>

## A suggestion for prayer

If you would like to pray with the Divine Office this Advent, and haven't done so before we suggest you can begin by praying the 'O' Antiphons in the week before Christmas. End your day praying the 'O' Antiphon for that day, followed by the Magnificat, the Glory Be and then a repeat of the 'O' Antiphon. We have also provided you with a short reflection for each day, adapted from '*Seven Bells to Bethlehem The O Antiphons*', by Oliver Treanor.

## The Magnificat

My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.  
He looks on his servant in her lowliness;  
henceforth all ages will call me blessed.

The Almighty works marvels for me.  
Holy his name!

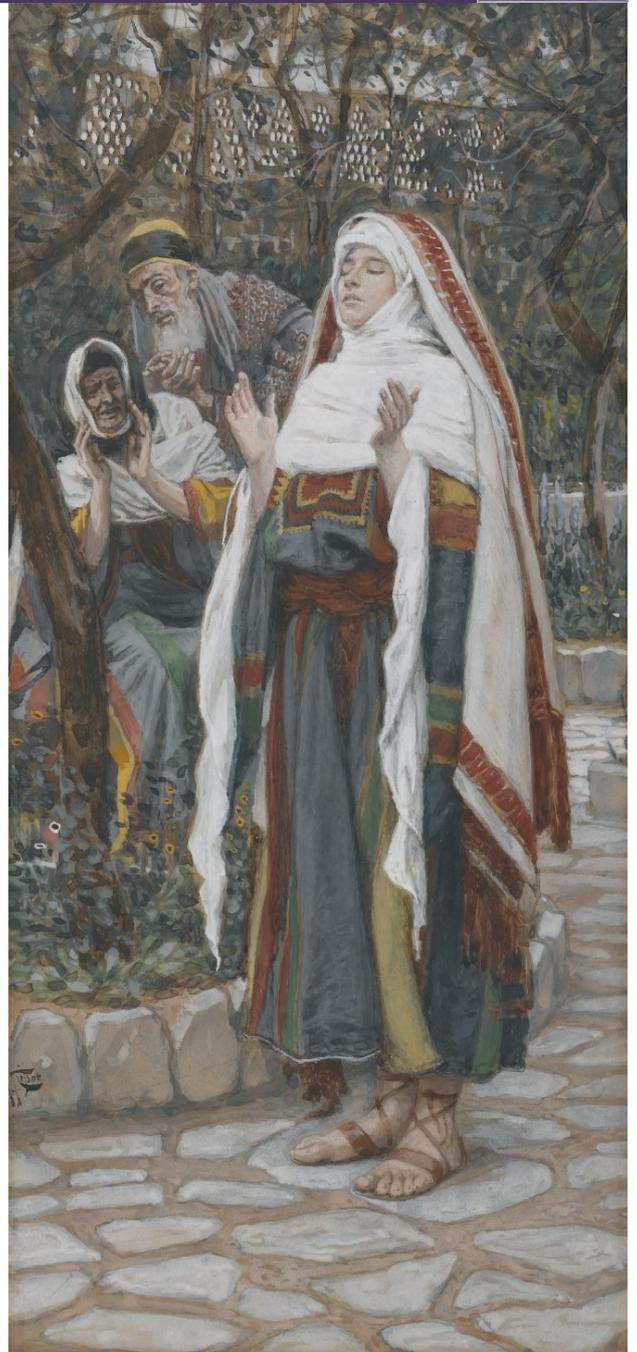
His mercy is from age to age,  
on those who fear him.

He puts forth his arm in strength  
and scatters the proud-hearted.  
He casts the mighty from their thrones  
and raises the lowly.

He fills the starving with good thing,  
sends the rich away empty.

He protects Israel, his servant,  
remembering his mercy,  
the mercy promised to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his sons for ever.

Glory be to the Father,  
and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning,  
is now, and ever shall be, world without end.  
Amen.



17<sup>th</sup> December

# O Sapiientia

*O Wisdom,  
you come forth from the mouth of the Most High.  
You fill the universe and hold all things together in a  
strong yet gentle manner.  
O come to teach us the way of truth.*

see Sirach 24:3; Wisdom 8:1

## *Reflection*

To live as God wills is to have wisdom. It requires knowledge and understanding. It brings inner strength and fruitfulness. All these are gifts of the Holy Spirit and are signs of his presence within the Christian.

Without God's wisdom we cannot please the Lord, cannot house the Spirit within us, cannot know Christ. How appropriate then that in Advent as we ponder the meaning of the Lord's coming we should begin by asking for that which it pleases God to bestow on Solomon because he desire it above all other things.

How do I live wisely, with integrity, uprightly, with the goodness that brings self-respect? How do I achieve a meaningful human existence through noble character and conduct, free from the tyranny of egotism and its retinue - fear, insecurity, suspicion, alienation and despair?

Our Advent answer is only in Christ Jesus whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor 1:24,30).



18<sup>th</sup> December

O Adonai.

*O Adonai and leader of Israel,  
you appeared to Moses in a burning bush  
and you gave him the Law on Sinai.  
O come and save us with your mighty power.*

see Exodus 3:2; Exodus 6:6

### *Reflection*

What the Church has in mind when it intones this antiphon is the great event of the exodus when God's people were delivered from slavery through Moses. When we, the people of God, continue to call upon the coming of Christ, as O Adonai (Lord), we are directly addressing Mary's son.

One of the earliest Christian faith-formulas was 'Jesus is Lord'. 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead', wrote St Paul to the Romans, 'you will be saved' (10:9). For not by accident was Jesus crucified, nor by the whim of tragic fate, but by deliberate, pre-destined design, in order that sin might be forgiven through the name of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of that name be poured out and received (Acts 2:38).

Jesus wants us to use his name to enter into deep, personal relationship with him. To pray 'Jesus' is to invoke him and to call him within us. His name is the only one that contains the presence it signifies.



19<sup>th</sup> December

# O Radix Jesse

*O stock of Jesse,  
you stand as a signal for the nations;  
kings fall silent before you whom the peoples acclaim.  
O come to deliver us, and do not delay.*

see Isaiah 52:13, 15; Isaiah 53:2

## *Reflection*

Children are a promise fulfilled. They carry the family name, they will continue the line. They are the future that blesses the efforts of the past.

They ensure a kind of immortality on which the family hopes are concentrated. This is especially true when there is an only child.

It was to David's line (Jesse was the father of David) that the promise made to Abraham was to pass down through the generations, the promise of a Messiah and God always keeps his promises. This promise was fulfilled when the angel Gabriel was sent to 'a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David' (Luke 2:26).

Jesus is the fulfilment of the stock (root) of Jesse for he tells us 'I am the true vine, you are the branches... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'. (John 15:1,5; 12:32)



20<sup>th</sup> December

# O Clavis David

*O key of David and sceptre of Israel,  
what you open no one else can close again;  
what you close no one can open.*

*O come to lead the captive from prison;  
free those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death.*

see Isaiah 22:22; Revelation 3:7

## *Reflection*

The fourth of the seven antiphons invites us to recognize Christ's birth as the moment when mankind found the lost key to its destiny.

The key was the symbol of authority at the palace of Jerusalem. In particular it gave power to grant or restrict access to the royal personage. St Paul writes 'Through Christ we both (Jews and Gentiles) have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:18-19).

What Jesus opens is the possibility of choosing freely the full truth which God revealed in him. Because there can be no truth without sacrifice, and no sacrifice without self-denial, the cross marks man's coming-of-age, his adulthood. His human nature re-formed into the shape of Christ's humanity, he is no longer imprisoned by the tyranny of pleasing himself, which ends in death. He is empowered to achieve what is pleasing to God, which ends in life.



21<sup>st</sup> December

# O R i e n s

*O Rising Sun,  
you are the splendour of eternal light  
and the sun of justice.*

*O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death.*

see Isaiah 9:1; Malachi 3:20 and also 2 Peter 1:19

## *Reflection*

The Church hails Christ as the Rising Sun (or the Dawn) at eventide on December 21st - the mid-winter solstice and the darkest day of the year. The sun is at its furthest remove from the northern hemisphere. It appears to pause as if in death - but only to return, rising once more to begin a new cycle in the seasons of life. The timing of the antiphon is perfect. It reflects the people's hope in the birth of a child destined to die that he might rise in a dawning that would conquer darkness forever. Christ has triumphed over sin and death, so those he has redeemed will share his victory over every bleakness in the human condition that winter symbolizes.

All God's revelation works, stage by stage, to bring humanity to the knowledge and love of the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This is why the Bible abounds in images of light, for from the very beginning it is made clear that God separated the light from the dark.

The rays of this rising sun illuminate an ancient burial chamber. Like the first disciples running to that empty tomb on Easter morning, who 'saw and believed' (John 20:8), the Church too knows how to gaze in at bright emptiness and discern there a fullness of meaning. Such a faith as this lightens the vacancy of winter-waiting, and enjoins a community to celebrate with thanks and praise the December birth of its Easter Saviour.



22<sup>nd</sup> December

# O Rex Gentium

*O King whom all the peoples desire,  
you are the cornerstone which makes all one.  
O come and save man whom you made from clay.*

see Isaiah 28:16 and also Ephesians 2:14

## *Reflection*

What Christ has to offer is very attractive: unity among peoples. Real unity, born out of peace with God, developing into multi-national fraternity, but beginning as integrity on the level of the individual person. It is the dream of civilisation. The dream is still no more than an elusive reality. And yet the enthusiasm for goodwill that Christmas generates year by year, for reconciliation, for laying down arms, suggests a tacit acknowledgement that lasting harmony is related ultimately to the Kingship of Christ.

Peace is still regarded as an attainable ideal. That spirit of conciliation, is the spirit of the incarnation. It signals the presence in history of the Prince of Peace whose reign has already begun and will not cease until its purpose is achieved. Each year on December 22<sup>nd</sup> the voice of the Church harmonizes with the spirit of all mankind in a common aspiration for a better future.

Christ's coming actually establishes what it proclaims. Jesus's act of redemption puts communion among men within reach as a present possibility, not just a future heavenly hope. Because of the Nativity, world peace is no romantic day-dream. It is an inevitability.



23<sup>rd</sup> December

# O Emmanuel

*O Emmanuel,  
you are our king and judge,  
the One whom the peoples await and their Saviour.  
O come and save us, Lord, our God.*

see Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 33:22

## *Reflection*

The last of the seven titles of Jesus before the Vigil of Christmastide is without doubt the most beautiful of all. Emmanuel: God-with-us. In Jesus, God is personally present to the world. On the eve of the Nativity 'Emmanuel' is telling those who wait for God that he is closer than they could possibly imagine. God, through his Son, with us in Jesus the man. The marvellous depth of the incarnation is given here for our contemplation in a single word. As long as our capacity for wonder lasts, the wonder of this miracle will never be exhausted.

God's presence *is* salvation. In the Old Testament God first revealed his existence as Creator and Liberator. His work prepared men for his fuller presence in the New Testament as Jesus, Redeemer and Mediator. In this final age of the plan, the age of the Church, he is internally present as Spirit: the Sanctifier and Giver of Life. Just as the Father revealed the Son to the world, and through the Son the Spirit, so in the Spirit mankind is united with the Son through whom we are brought to the Father. This is our salvation, in our Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



Did you know?

The Latin versions of each of the titles of the Messiah are:

**S**apientia (Wisdom),

**A**donai (Lord),

**R**adix (Root),

**C**lavis (Key),

**O**riens (Rising Sun),

**R**ex (King), and

**E**mmanuel (Emmanuel).

Take the first letters of each of the titles, starting with the last and working back to the first.

You spell: EROCRAS or 'ero cras' which is Latin for 'tomorrow, I will come'.

Reflections for each 'O' Antiphon are taken from *Seven Bells to Bethlehem, The O Antiphons*, by Oliver Treanor, 1995, Gracewing.

Copies can be obtained directly from <http://www.gracewing.co.uk/page326.html>



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