

## Overview

The O Antiphons (also known as the *Great Advent Antiphons* or *Great Os*) are short verses used before and after Mary's song, the Magnificat, in services of evening prayer in the last seven days of Advent in the Western Church. They likely date back to sixth-century Italy and became one of the key musical features of the days leading up to Christmas.

The first letters of the titles, from last to first, appear to form a Latin acrostic, *Ero cras*, meaning 'Tomorrow, I will be [there]', mirroring the theme of the antiphons:

17 December:	O <b>S</b> apientia	<i>O Wisdom</i>
18 December:	O <b>A</b> donai	<i>O Lord</i>
19 December:	O <b>R</b> adix Jesse	<i>O Root of Jesse</i>
20 December:	O <b>C</b> lavis David	<i>O Key of David</i>
21 December:	O <b>O</b> riens	<i>O Dayspring</i>
22 December:	O <b>R</b> ex Gentium	<i>O King of the Nations</i>
23 December:	O <b>E</b> mmanuel	<i>O With Us is God</i>

Each verse echoes Scripture - often different verses (including some from the collection of books we know as the Apocrypha) are knitted together to speak of Jesus.

Each verse follows the same structure - a Messianic title (eg O Wisdom) followed by a line which elaborates that title (eg "coming from the mouth of the Most High"), the verb "to come" followed by an elaboration of what Jesus will do when he comes again. The antiphons are still used in the Catholic and Lutheran churches at evening prayer and during Mass but almost every church uses them as an Advent hymn for example, *O Come O Come Emmanuel* - a firm favourite with its haunting plainsong tune.

These sessions will look at each of these ancient verses - themselves taken from Scripture and reflect on them as we journey towards Christmas.

## Session 1: O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse



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.

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.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel*

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.

### O Sapientia (O Wisdom)



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. *(the O Antiphon)*

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High *(Sirach 24:3)*

Wisdom reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders  
all things well *(Wisdom 8:1)*

Forsake childishness, and live, and walk by the ways of prudence" *(Proverbs 9:6)*



- When have you felt foolish? What did it feel like?
- What things seem foolish to you know in our society?
- Elaine Graham notes that often Jesus' actions and words seem foolish – to his hearers and maybe to us. What “foolish” things might, in reality, be wise and turn our lives and our society around?

### Prayer



O come O Wisdom, show us the way—  
away from folly towards the day when sense and order ground our way,  
the way you path until the end of days. Amen

## O Adonai (O Lord)



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. (*the O Antiphon*)

"I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name 'The Lord' (Adonai) I did not make myself known to them" (*Exodus 6:2-3*)

"These are the commandments that the Lord gave to Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai" (*Leviticus 27:34*)



- Jewish people don't speak the name of God – seeing it as too holy to say aloud. In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament the vowels are missed out to leave the unpronounceable YHWH. Why do you think there is this idea in Jewish theology about not naming God?
- Muslims have 99 names for God which describe who God is the All Merciful, the Source of Peace, the Guardian of Faith, etc. (there's a story that the reason the camel smiles is she knows the 100<sup>th</sup> name of God!) We use many ways of describing God – Lord, Most High, Ancient of Days, Father, Mother, Faithful One, Rock. Which names do you like to use for God – and why?
- Are there any names or descriptions of God you don't like or feel comfortable with? If so which ones and why?

### Prayer



God of many names, but one reality  
we thank you for reaching out to humanity time and time again,  
speaking words of grace and liberation.  
Come redeem us from all that traps and imprisons us.  
Stretch out your mighty arm and bring your peace and justice.  
in the name of Jesus, our Adonai.

## 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. (*the O Antiphon*)

"the Root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples" (*Isaiah 11:10*)

"kings shall shut their mouths because of him" (*Isaiah 52:15*)

"him the Gentiles shall beseech" (*Isaiah 11:10*)



- The Biblical writers were faced with how to restore a ruined nation and looked back to its roots to find, there, a promise of salvation. What might the roots be of our nation? (Do you define nation as the UK or one of its constituent parts?) Are these roots secure and reliable to look to the future with?



- The Biblical writers were desperate to be set free from their oppressors – indeed the Biblical story of the Jewish people is full of their oppressors – Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and then Romans. In our world now many yearn for salvation from oppression – where might there be hope in our current world for freedom and flourishing?
- Jonnie Hill maintains that our fullest stature, the place where we'll flourish is within our identity of being "in Christ." Is this identity one which supersedes all others or simply one of many for us? (depending on our answer other questions arise – obeying unjust laws, for example, are impossible if our primary identity is in Christ).



### Prayer

God, as we journey through Advent, and await the coming of Emmanuel,  
we look upon the many crises affecting our world,  
seeing little but a landscape of bare roots and stumps.

Grant us not just hope,  
but strength and nourishment from your deep, deep roots.  
May our arms be as branches reaching out into your world –  
agents of love, justice, and mercy in Christ's name. Amen.

## Session 2: O Key of David, O Day Spring, O King of the Nations



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

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.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

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

### 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. *(the O Antiphon)*

"I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David" *(Isaiah 22:22)*

"to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon" *(Isaiah 42:7)*

"...I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." *(Matthew 25.43)*



- Does prison work?
- What might the purposes of sentencing in the courts be about?
- What might setting the prisoner free mean in our contexts?
- Jesus says one of things we'll be judged on, alongside feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty and clothing the naked, is visiting those in prison. Have you ever done that? What might encourage or stop you doing so?

### Prayer



Light of the World, you experienced spiritual and literal darkness.  
We pray for people incarcerated, for those who work in prisons,  
and for those involved in the administration of justice.  
Help all who are caught in their own darkness  
to find a way to the warmth of the light.  
We pray for victims of crime that they may find peace.  
In the name of the Prince of Peace.

## O Oriens (O Dayspring)

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



"who visits us like the dawn from on high" (*Luke 1:78*)

"to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (*Luke 1:79*)



- How do you feel at this time of the year? Excited by the lights and warmth or gloomy at the long hours of darkness?
- Have you ever been up for dawn in midwinter? How did that feel?
- Light is an image we use a lot in Advent – the European centric nature of the liturgy means that we're in the darkest months in the Northern Hemisphere – in what ways might Christ's light change our world?
- In what ways might we, as a church and as individuals, act as light in our world?

### Prayer



O God of Justice  
shine your light of righteousness today on all who are oppressed,  
all who live under a shadow, and  
all who feel their hope diminished by their circumstances.  
Kindle your flame within each of us  
that we may burn brightly with your love and hope.  
Today and always, Amen

## 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. (*the O Antiphon*)

"Who would not fear you, O king of the nations?" (*Jeremiah 10:7*)

"See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious  
cornerstone, a sure foundation" (*Isaiah 28:16*)

"he has made both groups (Jew and Gentile) into one" (*Ephesians 2:14*)



- We use the image of King for Jesus quite a bit – it's one of many Biblical images for Jesus and God. Is it a useful image for you? Why/why not?
- In the UK most of us are living for the first with a King rather than a Queen. The sense that Queen Elizabeth gave to many of us was of constancy even though she changed quite a bit over her reign. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a monarch? (remember too there's more than one model of having a president – the American model is but one, there's also the German and Irish models).
- What are the ways in which Jesus subverts traditional ideas about kings?

### Prayer



King Jesus, whatever our views on worldly issues  
never let us be divided in our love of you.  
Save us! Liberate us! All of us!

## Session 3 O Emmanuel

*you will need a Bible, pen and paper for this session*



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

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.*



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

"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him  
Immanuel" *(Isaiah 7:14)*

"we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people"  
*(1 Tim 4:10)*

Instead of discussion this week we're going to give you time to write your own O Antiphon! We've looked at them in some detail but you may not have quite picked up the structure which is:

- a title for Jesus,
- followed by a line which elaborates that title (eg "coming from the mouth of the Most High"), the verb "to come"
- followed by an elaboration of what Jesus will do when he comes again.

So to use the example Martin Knight mentions from the Rev'd Jim Cotter we might create:

O Silent Song,  
you resonate with all creation which sings your praise,  
come and sing with us,  
that all may find their joy and fulfilment in You,  
who are our life and our song. Amen.

You may wish to use a Biblical image or another from Your own prayer life. It doesn't have to be very polished but is a chance to use this structure of praise to help you in your prayers. Take around 30 minutes to write one or two and then when every one's ready share them together, then join in as we sing the O Antiphons together.





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.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.*

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

3 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.

4 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.

5 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.

6 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.

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



### **Prayer**

Advent God,  
We give thanks for your constant presence  
and for the renewal, each year, of the assurance of your Son, Emmanuel.  
Open our minds to the breadth of this promise,  
that you are God with us;  
God in and through all,  
God renewing and recreating all.  
So be it. Amen