

# daily devotions

from the United Reformed Church

## The *O Antiphons* Leaders' Guide



*graphic credit: Loyolapress.com*

### 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.

### ***How to Use This Resource***

This resource is designed to be used in a variety of ways. It could be the basis for a congregational day together – either at church, a local hotel or retreat centre, or in someone’s home. It could be used over a series of three weeks as a mid-week study group either in person or via Zoom. It could be used as an activity across a pastorate of several congregations or used in just one congregation. We’ve made it as flexible as possible and anticipate each session will take around 90 minutes.

You will need...

A leader who will have to have read the material beforehand and be prepared to lead discussion. This person might ask others to read the Biblical passages and reflections but should be prepared to ask the questions and encourage the quiet, and quieten the over enthusiastic, so that everyone gets a chance to speak.

A host to work out refreshments if at church or in someone’s home.

A techie to look after the technology if offering this via Zoom.

A musician, or good singer, to lead the singing. If that is too much of a tall order simply read through the words of the hymns treating them as poems.

**This** leader’s resource **and** copies of the members’ resource for each week

<i>When You See This Logo</i>	<i>This happens</i>
	<p>There's some text to read</p>
	<p>There's a hymn to sing or look at  <i>We're just using O Come O Come Emmanuel,  but use the words on the sheet.  Music at RS 126, CH4 273, StF 180, MP 493</i></p>
	<p>There's readings  to read and think about</p>
	<p>There's some questions to answer</p>
	<p>We pray</p>

## 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)*



#### Reflection

Nobody ever wants to be labelled a fool. Sure, people will act the fool to raise a smile or even a laugh. That action, though, is measured; it is within calculated boundaries. The one who plays the fool knows when it is wise to stop.

When we sit and watch some stand-up comedians, we might question their wisdom as they push boundaries or poke fun at another's foolishness. However, their reflection of human foolishness is so cutting at times that what they say or do does not make us laugh, instead it makes us feel uncomfortable. The lack of sense they portray, the incapacity to follow instruction they demonstrate, and the stupid words spoken show us how foolish we can be, even when we try not to be.

As we begin to look more ardently toward the coming of Jesus into the world, it is maybe no surprise that our first antiphon calls for wisdom to come. In a world where the trend is towards chaos, where many words are spoken first and thought

about later, humanity is in need of one who will not just show us our foolishness but will show us how to stop being fools.

There are moments in the Gospels' retelling of Jesus's story that we might perceive Jesus's actions not as wise or prudent but foolish and irresponsible. Yet, just as when the one acting the fool knows when to stop, so did Jesus. His folly only went as far as was needed to make the point. In fact, his words and actions were astute and carefully crafted to help the world see its folly and strive to change.

*The Rev'd Dr Elaine Colechin,  
Minister, Bromley United Reformed Church  
and St Mark's United Church, Greenwich*



- 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*)

### Reflection



'How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire?' John Mason's hymn reminds us of the impossibility of truly expressing the glory and wonder of God's reality, a mystery beyond our words or imaginations. Yet this is the God who encountered Moses as 'I am who I am' and is our 'I am' too, one whom we can

call Adonai or Lord.

Our Jewish friends recognise the name of God – the ‘I am’ or Hebrew YHWH - as so holy that when reading aloud they use the Hebrew word ‘Adonai’ to express their reverence. Here in the second of the seven Advent Antiphons, the writer also uses the Hebrew ‘Adonai’ to pray to the sacred mystery that is YHWH.

That name, YHWH, was given to Moses in the majestic fire of the burning bush. There God is revealed as the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, but more than that: Moses asks for God’s name and the mysterious reply is that ‘I am who I am’ (also translated ‘I will be-there’). Here is a God of past, present and future – an abiding presence that brings freedom and liberation. The Antiphon speaks of the giving of the Law at Sinai to bring justice and order and the outstretched arm (Exodus 6.1) that lets the enslaved and suffering people of Israel go.

Here, condensed in four lines is the very heart of Israel’s experience of God, but it doesn’t stop there. The verse connects that reality to our own lives now, praying that the ‘I am’, revealed to Moses long ago will ‘come and redeem us’. In this Advent time we are led step by step to Emmanuel, the ‘God with us’ in Jesus Christ, the ‘I am’ made flesh and blood, born in Bethlehem, suffering with and for the world, made present among us today, as Living ‘Adonai’.

*The Rev’d Terry Hinks,  
Minister of Trinity, High Wycombe and Cores End URCs*



- 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*)

### Reflection



Last year, after I was ordained and we'd moved into the manse, we discovered a patch of garden, that had been cleared, was once home to fruit trees. Our neighbours told us of their relief that they'd been cut down, but I felt sadness for the loss of all that fruitful potential. This set me on a mission to look for replacement trees – hopefully some that might not grow too large so as not to disturb the neighbours. Experienced gardeners will know of the horticultural technique to ensure a smaller fruit tree. A fruiting species is grafted onto the rootstock of another smaller species – the roots being the most significant determinant of a tree's eventual stature.

When we read of the Root of Jesse in Isaiah (sometimes translated as the Stump of Jesse), we are offered an image of the state of the nation of Judah following the exile in Babylon – a nation so ground down all that is left is a stump of roots. The promise that the Messiah would spring forth from Jesse's stump, both recognised the nation's desperate state and need to be delivered from their oppressors, while affirming that it would be from the royal Davidic lineage that the Messiah would come.

The O Antiphons beautifully frame the springing forth of Jesus, the Messiah as both originating from and embodying the Root of Jesse. The provenance of Jesus' origin is a clear fulfilment of prophecy. It is on the rootstock of this nation, this chosen people of God that the Messiah has come – an emblem of God's love for all peoples' and in whose presence oppressors will be brought low. To return to the image of fruit trees, the principle of grafting for eventual size can also act in reverse. And so it is with us – as we are grafted into Christ, it is in and through Emmanuel (God's own rootstock in human form) that we can reach our fullest human stature.

*The Rev'd Jonnie Hill,*



- 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 mankind.  
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)*

### Reflection



Having served for a time as a magistrate I have had opportunity to visit some of Britain's prisons. What struck me most about those who came before the courts, and who are incarcerated in our nation's prisons, is that these are ordinary people. People with stories and families and often complicated lives. There were occasions where I wondered if confronted by a similar set of circumstances encountered by a defendant if I too might have found myself in the secure dock in a courtroom. There were times too where I learned to surf the wave of my own emotional response to be able to balance what might be reasonable expectations by the public, community safety, the sentencing framework magistrates and judges are required to work within, the interests of justice particularly in respect of victims of crime, and the story of the person before the court at that time

For the most part the Bible refers to prisons in a matter-of-fact way. References are made to people being imprisoned without judgement about how or why. The antiphon we take for our reflection today picks up a theme that runs through the Bible that prisons are places of darkness to be freed from. No judgement is made whether the prisoner deserves their freedom or not.

There is a tendency to read verses like this in a metaphorical sense that everyone has some sort of mental/emotional/spiritual prison from which they need release to thrive. Perhaps this is so. But what about people incarcerated in actual prisons, without getting into moral or political judgements about why they are there? Almost everyone incarcerated will one day return to life in the outside community. How should we respond to those with prison experience in their story?

It is worthy of reflection that for the most serious offences what society takes from people who commit them is their time. Release brings the return of being able to control one's own time. Time is one of the biggest gifts we can give and the most serious we can take.

*The Rev'd Sarah Moore,  
Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland,  
and Assistant Clerk of the General Assembly*



- 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*)

### Reflection



In this darkest time of the year, after the solstice when the day is shortest and night longest, we long for the light. We are waiting for longer days to return – yet the morning star heralds the coming of the day.

Midwinter dawn, if we can see it on a fine morning, is a glorious sight. It breaks on the world, bringing hope and promise to our eyes, just as the coming of God as a human baby, as one of us, brings hope to our hearts.

These words evoke the vision of the community of worshippers in the presence of God in Revelation 22 “And there will be no more night, for the Lord God will be their light.” As ever in Advent, we look to the fulfilment of God’s kingdom.

The light of justice is heralded in this antiphon. We acknowledge the continuing need of our world for God’s righteousness, so that light may shine in every dark place. We hunger for righteousness, still now in our darkened world.

Zechariah’s prophecy tells of the promised One who will bring light to all. We, having witnessed the light of Christ’s first coming, yearn for the light to dawn in all dark places at the coming of the kingdom.

This powerful prayer tugs at our deepest heartstrings with the imagery of light brought to all who need it.

It has been set to music powerfully by James Macmillan – you might already have heard this music at a Christmas concert. It is haunting and prayerful as well as a powerful cry to God from those in darkness, but who hold fast to their faith in the bringer of Light. This modern music brings these ancient words to powerful life for me.

*The Rev’d Helen Everard,  
minister at Fleet United Reformed Church in Hampshire*



- 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*)

### Reflection



There are times when I know – not merely speculate about – but know in the utter centre of my consciousness and heart – that God has a great sense of humour. So, here I am reflecting on this archipelago of readings loosely linking together verses about a uniting monarch who will gather together all the disparate and disputing peoples and will even breach the great divide (of its time and maybe still in ours) of the old and the new believers. I'm doing so two days before the Queen is buried. Or Elizabeth Windsor as we knew her in our household. I 'came out' as a republican nearly thirty years ago, whilst serving as a county councillor not far from Windsor

Castle. You can imagine the hoo-haa.

My republicanism is built upon my interpretation of Biblical admonitions to be wary of earthly monarchs and my concern that rulers who claim to be somehow greater than the mere sinners that we all are, set themselves, and those who follow them, into conflict with our Kingdom-building calling.

I am very much aware – and vicariously proud - of the witness of our dissenting Protestant forebears who took enormous risks in taking specific sides during the turbulent seventeenth century, including: Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers and Fifth Monarchists (“No King but Jesus!”)

And yet, these passages remind me that through the sacrifice and triumph of the Christ in Jesus, we are ultimately united together, regardless of the often very important differences of opinions that we hold.

I know many of my fellow strivers-after-the-truth have come to quite different conclusions both about hereditary monarchs and how to respond more generally to unjust regimes and systems.

Jesus is the one certainty that unifies us through all times and in all circumstances. It is to him that we all, as equals, cling for our liberation and salvation. Ultimately, He is our sure foundation and through our belief in Him, whether republicans or monarchists, socialists or capitalists, we are brought together as one.

*Paul Simon is an Elder at Hadleigh URC*



- 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

*participants will need Bibles, pens 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)*

### Reflection



Since reading the late Jim Cotter's wonderful Advent book 'Expectant' (Cairns Publications, 2002), full of creative new and reworked 'O' Antiphons, I have been hooked to this form of liturgical response and long for Advent each year! It has become my go-to Advent daily reading. With beginnings like 'O come... thou wounded stag', 'thou silent song' and 'thou salmon, swift', his refreshing relationship to creation and life on this earth, has so clearly connected me to the reality we see expressed in today's antiphon: Emmanuel – God with us. I have found myself realising that I have always limited the 'us' to humanity. Jim's amazing words broadened my mind, so that 'us' now includes the whole of creation, including 'thou swallow small'.

I feel like I'm ignoring the king and lawmaker bit, which you may have connected to, but, thanks to Jim, I can't hear 'O come, O come...' without knowing deep in my heart that God comes to 'us': to all creation.

I wonder if this insight touches you as it did me? Does it speak to us in a new way as we face a Climate Emergency?

O Emmanuel, God with 'us' – come and save us.

*The Rev'd Martin Knight  
is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon  
and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)*

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