

The Seven O Antiphons of Advent

The O Antiphons refer to the seven antiphons that are recited (or chanted) preceding the Magnificat during Vespers of the Liturgy of the Hours. They cover the special period of Advent preparation known as the Octave before Christmas, Dec. 17-23, with Dec. 24 being Christmas Eve and Vespers for that evening being for the Christmas Vigil.

The O Antiphons were mentioned in the 5th century, and by the 8th century, they were used in liturgical celebrations in Rome. The usage of the O Antiphons was also prevalent in monasteries, that we may conclude that in some fashion the O Antiphons have been part of our liturgical tradition since the very early Church.

The importance of O Antiphons is twofold: Each one highlights a title for the Messiah: O Sapientia (O Wisdom), O Adonai (O Lord), O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse), O Clavis David (O Key of David), O Oriens (O Rising Sun), O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations), and O Emmanuel. Also, each one refers to the prophecy of Isaiah of the coming of the Messiah.

The Benedictine monks arranged these antiphons with a definite purpose. If one starts with the last title and takes the first letter of each one - Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia - the Latin words *ero cras* are formed, meaning, "Tomorrow, I will come". Therefore, the Lord Jesus, whose coming we have prepared for in Advent and whom we have addressed in these seven Messianic titles, now speaks to us: Tomorrow, I will come.

Advent:

We move from busyness to peace.

If we want to welcome the arrival of Jesus, we must first arrive at home with ourselves. ...becoming one with ourselves and finding harmony within ourselves.

Advent is a time to arrive within, of coming to peace and of reaching our centre.

In the quiet, things become clearer to us.

1. **O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and reaching from the beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly: Come and teach us the way of prudence.**

Wisdom is God and comes from God.

Book of Proverbs and the Book of Sirach are 2 books of wisdom.

Jesus fulfils our longing to be wise.

Jesus is the wisdom of God become human.
We meet the wisdom of God in all creation.
When God comes to earth, the cosmos itself changes.
Not only wisdom but love too permeates all things.
Wisdom orders everything in power and in love.
God treats people gently, especially broken people.
We yearn for Jesus to bring together power and gentleness in us.
We ask for wisdom with a deep yearning.
Today so many different 'wisdom voices'..we are confused. We do not know whom to follow.
We long for God himself to come in Jesus Christ.
We want to be able to look at the incomprehensibility of our world, and the reason for our lives.
Advent is the promise that God himself will come with all wisdom.

2. O Adonai and Ruler the house of Israel, you appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush, and on Mt Sinai gave him your law. Come, and with an outstretched arm redeem us.

The Jews found it hard to say the name of God and used other names instead.....like Adonai, meaning Lord.
They did not trust themselves to utter God's name, because He was too holy.
Our God is a God who sees the suffering of his people. That is the assurance of Advent. God sees our need, our sadness and our doubt. God sees our inner taskmasters who push us to become better and faster, to achieve more, to become more perfect and to look good to everyone else.
When God rules inside us we are no longer ruled by our needs and passions.
At Christmas God wants to move into our hearts in order to rule there and to free us from all other secret rulers.
In Advent we acknowledge again and again that God sees us.
Advent is a longing for God to come to us....in our suffering, pain

This second Antiphon tells of a God who appeared to Moses in a burning bush. In the appearance in the thorn bush God heals Moses, who had experienced himself as a failure. The thorn bush is a wonderful image for us. When God enflames us with his fire, we burn without being consumed. We remain completely human...with all our failures and weaknesses. We remain weak and frail people, but we also become a place for God who wants to shine forth within us....
All of Advent is this appeal to God that he come and free us from our entanglements. We are caught up in the hurts of the past, we feel bound to function in society. ...feel bound by inner fears....
We ask God to free us from all these chains.
Advent is a time when we long for true freedom.

- 3. O Root of Jesse, you stand as a signal for humankind; before you kings shall keep silence, and to you all nations shall have recourse. Come, save, and do not delay.**

In this third antiphon Christ is addressed directly. ...the focus is not on God but on the sprout that God calls forth.

Remember also that Jesse was the father of King David, and Micah had prophesied that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David and be born in David's city, Bethlehem.

The Old Testament promises repeatedly that God will have something new sprout from that which has been cut down, from the ruins he will build a new city.

This assures us that even when something fails in our own lives, or is broken, something new can spring up from what has been broken or what has failed. It also assures our church that despite failures, something new will emerge...even today.

O Flower of Jesse's stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.

Here we place three requests before God: 1. That Christ may save us. 2. For Jesus to raise us up. 3. May Jesus no longer delay. He should not wait long to come.

- 4. O Key of a David, and scepter of the house of Israel; you open, and no one closes; you close, and no one opens. Come, and deliver from the chains of prison those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.**

A key was very important in olden times: a sign of power, control and privilege.

Jesus is the key of David. Jesus looks at those people pounding at the door...he sees their longing... he opens the door.

The key also gives us an image of opening the door to secrets that should be kept hidden. In dreams, a key often means that we can enter our own hearts or relationships with others.

We sometimes dream of standing in front of a locked door and can't find the key. Or our key does not fit. These can be warnings to take better care of ourselves. For too long we have lived away from our true hearts. ...and now we can't find a way back in.

We need Jesus as a key. He can grant us entry to the inner sanctum of our souls.

Jesus is not arbitrary in the use of his key:
He has come to open the door to life for us.

Our problems arise because often we are living outside of ourselves-without a relationship with our heart. We ourselves can no longer open the door. We are the ones who have shut the door.

We close the door to our heart with self-accusations ..,we punish ourselves and don't believe we deserve the grace of God.

We appeal to God to come and open the prison of darkness and the chains.

It is very human to fear death...psychology tells us this.

We tend to suppress this fear with a thousand activities or by proving our worth to ourselves and others.

Only when we look at our fear of death and hold it out to God will it change.

We ask in Advent that God enter our fear of death and transform it.

We yearn for Jesus to open the doors of our prisons and to break the chains that keep us captive.

Advent expresses our longing not to be alone in the prison of our fear, our depression, and our loneliness.

We ask that Jesus comes open the door so that he may enter our lives.

Then our prison will be transformed into a place of encounter.

Look at the image of a key and ask: Do I have the key to my heart?

Are there rooms that I will not enter because of the darkness or chaos I might find there?

Are there intruders who have broken into my inner rooms and taken away feelings of safety and of being at home?

Now in Advent open your innermost heart: with Jesus as the key, find an entrance into your heartand open it, so that Jesus can move in.

5. O rising Dawn, radiance of the light eternal and Sun of Justice; come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The Old Testament has many references to light: The Word of the prophets is like a light shining in a dark place.

We are often without hope....yet we can hold on to the words of the prophets until daylight comes. The word of the prophets refers to Christ as the light who shines inside us and illuminates all the darkness of our souls.

Jesus is the image of the eternal and unchanging light which can no longer be dimmed.

When the unchanging light of Christ shines within us, it drives away all the murky images that distort our true character. In the radiance of his light we make contact with our true selves.

The petition of this "O" antiphon is this: " Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

In Handel's Messiah the bass expresses the idea of sitting in the shadow of death in circular melodies. Then his voice rises into the heights each time "light" is sung, giving expression to the human longing for this light.

- 6. O King of the Gentiles and the Desired of us all, you are the cornerstone that binds two into one. Come, and save poor humanity, whom you fashioned out of clay.**

Here Jesus is recognised as King. The Feast of Christ the King highlights that he is a different type of king. The three wise men come to recognise his Kingship. The Romans put the inscription on the cross "This is Jesus the King of the Jews". This is a spiritual, philosophical concept.

We can say this of ourselves... "there is a kingship in us that is not of this world, there is a dignity in us that cannot be destroyed by any injury or insult of this world." Jesus rules in his truth and in his dignity.

This O Antiphon says that this king is the longing and the expectation of the nations.

The longing in our heart means that we reach towards the one who can fulfil our deepest needs.

In every one of us there is a yearning for the God who become human.

Jesus fulfils the longing that lies deep in the human soul.

In this antiphon Jesus is described as the 'Cornerstone': he holds the Church together. He holds our community together. He holds me together.

I am often unable on my own to bring together what is inside me and what is falling apart. Jesus holds my house together. We often feel torn between light and darkness, strength and weakness, good and evil. Jesus joins together the polar opposites in me. He unifies what I cannot bring together.

We are formed out of clay and thus we are frail, mortal, wounded. We ask that Jesus heal us. Jesus heals us by reminding us of our origins in clay and leading us to humility. We will only heal if we have the courage to descend into our own earthliness.

The 5th and 6th 'O' antiphons ask us to focus on the images of "LIGHT" and "Cornerstone". Christ is the only ground our house stands on. We all have wounded areas in our lives and bodies. Imagine that beyond and below all the hurts and violence there is a room of wholeness and healing. That is where Christ the true doctor, comes to you and lives with you. That is where you are healthy and whole. That is where no one (including yourself) can hurt you.

- 7. O Emmanuel our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God.**

Emmanuel is a name for God that translates the name Yahweh for daily life. God said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM."

I am here for you....I am with you.

Matthew is strong on the ongoing presence of God with us: Emmanuel is a statement and an objective description of what God is.

"I am with you always to the end of the age." Matt 28:20.

"Wherever two or three gather in his name, he will be there in their midst. Matt 18:20.

Emmanuel is the expected saviour of all the nations....the Gentiles.

He comes to heal, protect and save. He saves us from the entanglements of our guilt...he protects our true selves, he protects our inner core, the original image of God within us. He safeguards us from falling apart within, from losing our centre that holds everything together.

We yearn to be protected from every wrong turn, from wounds,

In Greek and Latin we have three concepts ...Saviour, Christ and Lord. Christ stands for the promise of the Messiah; Saviour stands for the one who meets the longing for the God who heals and saves; Lord is a title of honour of Jesus.

When Jesus is Lord in me, then I will no longer be ruled by my needs nor by the expectations of others.

Since Jesus is our Lord he frees us from all other lords.

In Advent we implore the Lord Jesus to rule in us.

There is no harshness in his rule,. He is the baby that lies in the manger.

He is the one who rules us with his love. We gladly allow a child to rule within us.

Let the image of Emmanuel accompany you through Advent: **"I am now walking through the streets of Hong Kong and God is in fact with me."**