

# Sermon preached at St John the Baptist, Devizes

22<sup>nd</sup> December 2019      (*Advent IV*)

## Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 7.10-16

Psalm 80.1-8,18-20

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25

My brothers and sisters, I would ask that you pray for me that I may speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, how Christmassy are we all feeling? Haven't had chance to think about it yet? Still got a long list of things to do before you can relax and enjoy it? Worried about whether Great-Aunt Hepzibah's going to have one sherry too many, mention 'it' again and offend everyone (whatever 'it' might be – most families have an 'it' of one sort or another)? After our Gospel reading this morning, I wonder whether Joseph had comparable worries as he waited for the birth of Jesus?

If any of that strike a chord with you this morning, I don't think you're alone but there is something very 'Advent' about feeling that way. Because we – the church, that is – are still very much in the season of Advent, however much the secular world might be desperately racing ahead to Christmas. Our tree remains undecorated (for the time being) and our hangings and vestments are still resolutely and penitentially purple, just as they are in Lent, even as vicars up and down the country grumble quietly to each other about having to do yet another cheery Christmas Carol service at a time of year when we are supposed to be feeling otherwise. At this time of year, as Christians, we can find ourselves in counter-cultural conflict as our liturgy encourages one sort of mindset whilst the rest of the world, it seems, is winding itself up into a crazed orgy of avaricious consumerism.

The word Advent derives from the Latin *ad venire* and simply means towards the coming, or arrival. In the broadest Christian understanding, there are two Advents: God coming to Earth in human form, and God returning to earth at the Second Coming, both of which are referred to specifically in the Creed we will say next. The season of Advent locates us between these two great Advents, and we therefore pray at this time of year especially for the coming of God into our hearts. And so our liturgy and readings point us in the direction of being Advent people: patient, expectant, calmly hopeful. With everything going on in the media and the high street at this time of year, that is about as counter-cultural a message as you could have, and Advent therefore can be a struggle for us in that sense.

I'm sorry that I can't offer you much help with the present buying or worries about Great-Aunt Hepzibah, but there is comfort to be had in a wonderful and ancient piece of liturgy that is something of a hidden gem I'd like to share with you. In the last week before Christmas day, starting on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, Advent changes up a gear and our expectant longing for Jesus is stoked up by the use of the great Advent O antiphons, which date back well over a thousand years and consist of paraphrases of many OT prophetic statements. Now, although they are used in our daily Evening prayer services, as well as in many other denominations, you might feel that you wouldn't know an antiphon from Auntie Hepzibah\*, but the O antiphons have actually been hidden in plain sight for many years. You might know them better in the words of *O come, O come, Emmanuel*, which Chris so inventively used in his organ interlude whilst I was getting from the crossing to the pulpit a moment ago.

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\* This joke only really works in a Northern accent

I'd like to read you the seven O antiphons now and, if you like, you can compare them to the version in the hymn book. Could you turn to hymn number 11 and look at the words on page 23?

17 <sup>th</sup> December	<b>O Sapientiae</b>	Verse 2	O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High... <sup>†</sup>
18 <sup>th</sup> December	<b>O Adonai</b>	Verse 3	O Adonai and leader of the House of Israel...
19 <sup>th</sup> December	<b>O Radix Jesse</b>	Verse 4	O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the people...
20 <sup>th</sup> December	<b>O Clavis David</b>	Verse 5	O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel...
21 <sup>st</sup> December <sup>‡</sup>	<b>O Oriens</b>	Verse 6	O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal...
22 <sup>nd</sup> December	<b>O Rex Gentium</b>	Verse 7	O King of the Nations and their desire...
23 <sup>rd</sup> December	<b>O Emmanuel</b>	Verse 1	O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver...

*Well, that's all very interesting and educational, you might be thinking, I didn't know that before, but what of it?* How can a thousand year-old piece of liturgy help us today? Well, have another look at them, remembering that they are based on OT prophetic cries of invocation, written mostly around the time of the Exile when the Jewish people were despairing of their captive subjugation in Babylon and longing for freedom and change. It seems to them there's no way out, no answer to their problems and they are crying out to their God in faith but also in desperation. They are as direct as prayers come, and speak from the heart of the deepest longings.

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<sup>†</sup> Translations can be found in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* ('the burgundy book'), p211 or the Church of England website, as well as many others.

<sup>‡</sup> Note that the invocation to Christ as the Morning Star, to 'come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness' is set to be read on the shortest day of the year!

If the run-up to Christmas can sometimes feel like it's getting on top of you, that the outside world neither knows nor cares about the real importance of Christmas and there's no time to stop and think, let alone to be quiet and still with God, you could do a lot worse than use these ancient and wonderful words that express not just despair but also that great Christian virtue, hope. Faithful hope in a caring creator, trusting hope in a redeeming Saviour and wonderful hope in a healing, loving God.