

Today we will be reflecting on the O Antiphons – These are traditional images of God based on the prophetic writings found in the book of Isaiah. Since the 7th or 8th century, monastic communities have been praying with these names during the last week of Advent, beginning on December 17th and ending on the 23rd, using a different image each day.

1 - O Sapientia, Come (O Wisdom, Come)

Isaiah 28:29 This also comes from the LORD of hosts, who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great.

*Oh, come, our Wisdom from on high,
Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

It is appropriate for the first of the O Antiphons, prayed on December 17th, to be Sapientia – Wisdom, because in many Old Testaments writings, it is said that the Spirit of Wisdom was with God from the beginning of Creation. In the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, and Sirach, this Wisdom figure, this co-creating spirit, actually became personified, emerging as a Wise Woman, as God's companion. The prophets and writers gave her the name Sophia, which is the Greek word for wisdom. From the book of Proverbs we hear:

Does not wisdom call, and understanding lift up her voice?

On top of the heights beside the way,
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;

At the entrance of the doors, she cries out:

"Listen, for I will speak noble things;

From everlasting I was established, from the beginning,

Blessed is the one who listens to me, for whoever finds me, finds life.

God came to us as Wisdom in the person of Jesus. Wisdom has been understood since ancient times not so much knowledge as moral living. It refers to making wise decisions, with both the mind and the heart. This image depicts how Jesus lived, using his mind to teach and discuss, and his heart to heal and love.

Wisdom has been with us since the beginning of time, and is still with us today, continually ready to point us in the right direction, to show us the prudent pathways, to guide our thoughts and actions.

Wisdom stands at the crossroads, where paths meet. That means she is available to us in our decision making, ready to guide us through discernment processes, pointing to new paths when old ones are closed off. She reminds us to be both intelligent and compassionate as we make decisions for our future.

May the spirit of Jesus grant us wisdom, both of mind and of heart.

Let us pray:

*O Wisdom of God, come~
You have been present since the beginning of time,
and still speak to us today.
You stand at the crossroads of life situations and decisions.
May we listen to your voice of guidance.
Amen.*

2 O Adonai, Come (O Lord of Ancient Israel Come)

Isaiah 11:4 But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth.

*Oh, come, oh, come, our Lord of might,
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times gave holy law,
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

This image of God reminds us that God has worked throughout the history of the Israelites to help those who are poor, those who are enslaved. While the image of Wisdom goes back to the beginning of Creation, the image of Lord of Ancient Israel refers to how God brought the Hebrew people out of slavery from Egypt to the promised land.

This is not an easy journey, 40 years of wandering through the desert. But throughout the trek, God's presence was continually made tangible. God gave them manna to eat, God's outstretched arm in a cloud guided them during the day, and it was during this journey that Moses received the ten commandments, the law which the people were to keep.

All these signs of God's presence and God's care for them were made new with the coming of Jesus. The forty years of travel in the desert became forty days of Jesus' temptation in the desert. The outstretched arm of God became the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross. The Manna, bread of heaven, became the bread of Communion. The ten commandments became the law of love, loving God with our whole selves, and loving neighbor as oneself.

Throughout their history, whenever the Israelites doubted God's presence, they were reminded by the prophets to look back and remember how God cared for them and led them to freedom. When we have doubts about God's presence and abiding love, we can also look back on our own lives, and see where God has been faithful to us, and take courage from that. We can also look back on the stories of our families, or of our church, our whole legacy told in the Scriptures. Time and again, we see that God has been present all along. God has never left us, and promises to be with us forever. May we always be aware of the Holy Spirit's abiding presence, promised and sent by Christ himself.

*Let us pray:
O Lord of Ancient Israel, Come~
When our faith waivers, remind us of all the times we have experienced your presence, of all the blessings you have bestowed on us.
Dispel our doubts and make us joyful witnesses of your abiding love.*

Amen.

3 O Radix, Come (O Flower of Jesse, Come)

Isaiah 11:1 Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

*Oh, come O Rod of Jesse's stem,
From ev'ry foe deliver them
That trust your mighty pow'r to save;
Bring them in vict'ry through the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

The third image is that of the root of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David, who became the greatest King of Israel. In those days, a priest or prophet, guided by God, would anoint the next King. When the prophet Samuel was told by God to go to Jesse's house to anoint the next King, Jesse called seven of his sons one by one to come before Samuel. God told Samuel that there was one more son, so Jesse sent for David, a mere shepherd, the smallest and youngest of all the brothers. God commanded Samuel to anoint him – David, as the future King.

This is typical of how God works. So often, the way we see things is not the way God sees. God saw what others did not see in David, God saw his potential, and made him a mighty King.

But later, the people awaiting a Savior expected a mighty King like David. Instead, they got Jesus, who lived not by might, but by love. He was not the mighty King they expected. Yet despite what looked like failure on earth, Jesus became the Savior of the world.

We often see only the outside, we judge by outward appearances: deciding who is a good person, who is deserving, who has no potential. But God often uses the most humble, the smallest among us to accomplish the greatest good.

We can take heart that God uses all of us, even when we feel we have little to contribute to God's work. May we always be open to the surprising ways God calls us and others.

Let us pray:

*O Root of Jesse's Stem, Come~
You see beyond the externals of our lives as they are
to the possibilities that can be.
Inspire us to believe that you will guide us into being all that we were created to be.
Amen.*

4 O Clavis, Come (O Key of David, Come)

Isaiah 22: 22-23 "Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open."

*Oh, come, O Key of David, come,
And open wide our heav'nly home;*

*Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

The fourth image, which is actually the O Antiphon for today, the 20th, is that of Key of David. The key is the emblem of authority and power. This image reminds us that Jesus is our authority, and our key. It is through his death and resurrection that the gates of heaven have been unlocked. It is his forgiveness and love that can unlock our hearts as well, giving us a freedom from the past and a new beginning.

This is what Jesus offers us – the Key for opening. It may be our eyes that need to be opened to a new way of seeing things, our minds to new ways of thinking, or our hearts to new ways of loving.

But keys both open and shut, both unlock and lock. Perhaps there are parts of our lives that need locking rather than unlocking. Old resentments and grudges can be like stray cats that keep coming around even when we think we are rid of them. But while we may not be able to stop them from coming around, we do have the choice of whether or not to feed them. The more we feed them, the more they will keep coming. So maybe, once we have dealt with a hurt or a betrayal, there comes a time when we need to close the door on it. Perhaps it is Jesus who is the key to locking that door once and for all.

Jesus is the key who opens and shuts. He calls us to closure on our past, and to openness in new ways of being, inviting us to a fresh start each day. May Jesus become the key and authority in our lives.

*Let us pray:
O Key of David, come~
Unlock our hearts,
setting us free from ill-will and resentment toward others,
setting us free from our sins..
Close and lock the doors on a past we cannot change,
and open for us a new path of life.
Amen.*

5 O Oriens, Come (O Radiant Dawn, Come)

Isaiah 9:2 The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.

*Oh, come, our Dayspring from on high,
And cheer us by your drawing nigh,
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

This is the image which is prayed on the 21st, the day with the shortest amount of daylight. It has been referred to as "morning star", "Dayspring", "rising sun", "radiant dawn". All these names beautifully express the idea of light shattering the darkness of night, the darkness of sin and death, of sickness and despair, with its brightness bringing healing and warmth. Jesus came as the true light – the one whose light darkness would not overcome.

I love the image of dawn for Advent – of the time when it is still not quite totally light, but there is a hint of light in the sky. The blues, roses, violets of this time of day summon to mind a hopefulness, an assurance that day will come, even though we have no direct evidence yet. This is the liturgical color for Advent, a time of hope for the light, but not of the light coming all at once. Dawn brings the light gradually. This is often how God works in our lives - slowly, persistently – with hints of light along the way.

The incarnation is the fulfillment of the promise of God with us. Jesus is born, light is in the world. At one moment in time God has shattered darkness and has entered the world as a human being.

There are times in our lives when God appears to us like that, all at once – when we have a sudden conversion moment. We may experience this in a religious setting, in nature, sometimes with the birth of a child. All of a sudden, everything looks different, looks brighter.

But I believe that in most cases, it is gradually that we encounter the presence of God. Like the image of the radiant dawn, we experience a gradual growing in relationship, an encounter with God that perhaps starts small, but then grows in grace. But the relationship takes hold, and soon the darkness in our lives starts to recede, and is replaced by the light of God's unconditional love.

May we always live in the light of Christ, in the hope of the new dawn.

Let us pray:

O Radiant Dawn, come~

Our hearts long for the light in these dark days.

Hold us tightly, tenderly through dark times

Until day breaks.

Let your light shine upon us now and always.

Amen.

6 O Rex, Come (O King of All Nations, Come)

Isaiah 2: 4: "He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war anymore."

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind

In one the hearts of all mankind;

Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,

And be yourself our King of Peace.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to you, O Israel!

This O Antiphon reminds us that God came to save all – not just the Jews, but Gentiles as well. It puts forth a vision of the world united under God, where we will all live in harmony with each other. It imagines a world with no barriers, where all have enough, and there is no more war. Our weapons are transformed, used for providing food rather than for destruction.

How do we achieve this togetherness – this peace? The monastic prayer that accompanies this antiphon says “Come and save the human race, which you fashioned out of clay.” Here is a reminder that deep down, we as human beings all have the same basic make up. We are all metaphorically made from clay, from the dust of the earth. And it is God who is the potter, the one who makes and fashions us. God wants to transform us into a people who live in harmony with others.

Jesus came to show us what the Kingdom of God could look like, if only we are willing to follow his lead. Look at those who followed him, those who were his companions. There were the disciples, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. There were the rich, the poor, the religious and the political. This combination of all sorts of people was a glimpse of what God’s realm is like – All these people drawn together by the one who is love.

This is the example that Jesus sets for us. We are called to make the vision of the Realm of God a reality – to take every opportunity to build a bridge instead of a barrier, to listen instead of ignoring, to offer words of comfort instead of condemnation. May we strive to live out this image of God, helping to build a world where all are united.

Let us pray-

O King of All Nations, Come~

*Remind us that you have come,
to save the whole world.*

*Bind us together, removing divisions, removing barriers,
that we might one day live as a united people.*

Amen.

7 O Emmanuel, Come (O God with Us, Come)

Isaiah 7: 14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.”

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,

And ransom captive Israel,

That mourns in lonely exile here

Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to you, O Israel!

O Come O Come Emmanuel. This is the final Antiphon before Christmas Eve when our longing will be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus – of “God with us.”

We recall that in with the birth of Jesus, God takes on our very flesh and human nature: God comes nearer to us than we could have ever imagined! This is not just an event which took place 2000 years ago, but God continues to dwell among us today. We still have the opportunity to experience Christ’s coming, Christ’s presence always.

This presence is felt in different ways. For some it is through worship, through songs, scripture, sermons, or prayers. It is also through the Spirit of caring and love in the church community, the “Body of Christ.” This is perhaps the most wonderful part of the incarnation – that God came as a human, and that God continues to work through us humans. For me, this is where I most experience the incarnate God. I think of God as love, as forgiving, as compassionate, as friend, and so it is through the love, forgiveness, compassion and friendship of others that I most truly experience the presence of God.

As the Body of Christ, we are called to be that presence made flesh. This is how we will experience the fullness of Emmanuel – the fullness of Christ with us – the fullness of Christmas. May we live as Christ’s presence in this world.

O Emmanuel, Come~

*We prepare to celebrate your birth,
your coming to earth as God incarnate.*

*Through your abiding care, your compassion and forgiveness,
your peacemaking ways, you show us the path of life.*

May we follow in your footsteps to make your presence manifest in the world.

Amen.

The last thing I want to say about these O Antiphons is that – if you take the beginning letter of each of the Latin names, and read from the bottom up, you will get the phrase *Ero Cras*. This means in Latin “Tomorrow, I will come”. This is the promise we will celebrate on Christmas Eve.

Let us rejoice in the coming of Christ, today, tomorrow and always.