

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Advent Year "A"

"Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid."

December 17-18, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 7: 10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

"O Come O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." So popular is this hymn, many mistake it for a Christmas Carol, when the words are thoroughly Advent in nature. Perhaps it is the hymn's proximity to Christmas that confuses. Regardless, it is a steady staple of Advent and we would do well to heed its lessons. The O Antiphons refer to the seven antiphons that accompany the Magnificat during Vespers, the Church's official Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.

These moving "O Antiphons" were regularly used by the eighth century when monks put together texts from the Old Testament which looked forward to the coming of our salvation. They form a rich mosaic of scriptural images and form the verses for my very favorite Advent Hymn, which we will sing during Communion.

During the Middle Ages it became traditional to ring the great bells of the church each evening as they were being sung. "They are a magnificent theology that uses ancient biblical imagery drawn from the messianic hopes of the Old Testament to proclaim the coming Christ as the fulfillment not only of Old Testament hopes, but present ones as well. Their repeated use of the imperative "Come!" embodies the longing of all for the Divine Messiah."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. USCCB website, "O Antiphons," at [usccb.org/prayer-and-worship](http://usccb.org/prayer-and-worship)

<sup>2</sup> See Fr. William Saunders, "What are the 'O Antiphons'?"

A particularly fascinating feature of the O Antiphons is that the first letter of each invocation, when read backwards, forms an acrostic in Latin: the first letters of Wisdom, Lord, Root, Key, Dawn, King and the final Emmanuel, form an acrostic in reverse order using their Latin names: **S**apientia, **A**donai, **R**adix, **C**lavis, **O**riens, **R**ex, and **E**mmanuel. The Benedictine monks did this on purpose: **EROCRAS**, loosely translated, can be seen as the words of Christ, responding to his people's plea, "Tomorrow I will be there."

Today's first reading from Isaiah references Emmanuel, a name that means "God is with us." Since for the Christian the incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's willingness to "be with us," it is understandable that this text was interpreted to refer to the birth of Christ. For God to be truly "with us" is the ultimate gift for which anyone could long in this life.

And God made that gift present by means of the "yes" of his chosen instrument, Mary, whose humility and fidelity became the proximate means our salvation. While the identity of the young woman referenced in Isaiah's prophecy remains a mystery, it in no way diminishes the significance of this prophecy. After all, they were God's words spoken through his chosen instrument.<sup>3</sup>

In these last days of Advent, let us patiently count down the days, as our salvation draws near. The antiphons help mark the sacred time, for soon enough, God will be with us. Let us prepare in our hearts a place for him to dwell.

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<sup>3</sup> In about the third century before Christ, the Old Testament and a few other texts were translated into Greek, compiling what became known as the Septuagint. The tradition held that 70 scholars worked to produce the text, thus the name. It is this version of the Old Testament in which we find the passage that the Virgin will bear a Son and they shall name him Emmanuel. The Hebrew *'almah* designates a young woman of marrying age, absent any specific reference to virginity. In the LXX, we see the Greek term *parthenos*, which means virgin.