



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 3

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel: Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns for Adults

Introduction

What familiar Advent hymn has resounded through time and place from medieval monasteries to modern worship spaces? What is the musical connection between a vespers service in 800 CE and an Advent service in 2015? The answer to both questions is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” As one of the church’s oldest texts, its origin is in the medieval monastic tradition of Advent vespers, and it remains a staple in many Advent services as the hymn sung on the first Sunday in Advent or, frequently, every Sunday throughout the season.

Reading Scripture, singing psalms, and praying were traditional activities for Jewish worship in both the temple and synagogue. The psalms were so central to temple liturgy that the Talmud gives a list of psalms appropriate for each day of the week. Early Christians continued the Jewish practice of chanting psalms and praying at designated hours of the day and night. As the early Christian church evolved, readings from the Gospels and Epistles supplemented the psalms alongside an expanding repertoire of sung canticles (biblical songs) and antiphons. The source of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” were the antiphons commonly known as the “O Antiphons,” “Great ‘O’ Antiphons,” or simply the “Os.”

Antiphons

The medieval era saw the rise of monasteries, cloistered communities in which priests prayed with Scripture

at designated times during the day and night. In the course of one week, members of the community chanted or recited all 150 psalms. These daily vigils acquired the designation of liturgical hours or divine offices. As early as 530 CE, eight offices were observed daily:

Matins (Midnight)

Lauds (at daybreak or 3:00 a.m.)

Prime (6 a.m.)

Terce (9 a.m.)

Sext (12 noon)

None (3 p.m.)

Vespers (early evening or 6 p.m.)

Compline (before retiring or 9 p.m.)

The essential format of each office involved alternation of five psalms with music (antiphons, canticles, and hymns), prayer, and other biblical passages. An antiphon, similar to a modern refrain or chorus, is a short sentence set to music, intended to reinforce the meaning of that Scripture. Originally, an antiphon was inserted between *each* verse of the psalm, which in the case of long psalms became a lengthy undertaking. Eventually, the practice evolved to singing the antiphon before and after a psalm or New Testament canticle. Vespers usually included the *Magnificat* canticle (Song of Mary) in addition to the psalm of the day.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of
his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me
 blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
 their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their
 thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise he made to our ances-
 ors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.
 (Luke 1:46–55)

During Vespers of the last week in Advent (December 17–23), the community sang the “O Antiphons” preceding and following the *Magnificat*, anticipating the coming of the Christ child. There are seven “O Antiphons,” one for each of the seven Vesper services during that week. Anonymous authors compiled images of the coming Messiah, primarily from the Old Testament. Each antiphon begins with “O” and a title for the coming Christ and concludes with a petition, producing rich imagery and profound meaning. The following “O Antiphons” are identified by the Latin name, Scripture references, the English translation, and the corresponding stanza in “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”¹

O Sapientia (Isa. 11:2–3; 28:29):
 O Wisdom, O holy Word of God,
 you govern all creation with your strong
 yet tender care:
 Come and show your people the way to
 salvation.

Stanza 2:
 O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
 who orderest all things mightily:
 to us the path of knowledge show;
 and teach us in her ways to go.
*O Adonai (Isa. 11:4–5; 33:22, Mic. 6:4;
 Exod. 19:16):*

O Sacred Lord of ancient Israel,
 who showed yourself to Moses in the burning
 bush,
 who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:
 Come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.
Stanza 3:
 O come, O come, thou Lord of might,
 who to thy tribes on Sinai’s height
 in ancient times didst give the law
 in cloud and majesty and awe.
O Radix Jesse (Isa. 11:1, 10; Isa. 52:15; Rom. 15:11):
 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.

Stanza 4:
 O come, thou Root of Jesse,
 free thine own from Satan’s tyranny;
 From depths of hell thy people save
 and give them victory o’er the grave.
O Clavis David (Isa. 9:6; 22:22; Rev. 3:7):
 O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel,
 controlling at your will the gate of heaven:
 Come, break down the prison walls of death
 for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow
 of death;
 and lead your captive people into freedom.

Stanza 5:
 O come, thou Key of David, come,
 and open wide our heavenly home;
 make safe the way that leads on high,
 and close the path to misery.
*O Oriens (Isa. 9:1; 58:8; 60:18–20; Mal. 4:2; Jn.
 8:12)*

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 in Advent (December 17–23), the
 community sang the “O Antiphons”
 preceding and following the
Magnificat, anticipating the coming
 of the Christ child.**

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice:

Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Stanza 6:

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.

O Rex Gentium (Isa. 2:4; 9:5; Dan. 7:14; Eph. 2:20):

O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart;

O Keystone of the mighty arch of man:

Come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.

Stanza 7:

O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife, and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

O Emmanuel (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23):

O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people: Come and set us free, Lord our God.

Stanza 1:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.²

Notice that the antiphon associated with stanza 1 of the modern hymn appears last. This is the antiphon set's traditional arrangement, forming an acrostic. The first letters of the Latin text spell SARCORE, which when read in reverse order spell the phrase "ero cras," meaning "I come tomorrow" or "I shall be [with you] tomorrow."³ Singing "O Emmanuel" last completes the acrostic the night before Christmas Eve, revealing its hidden message. The message is a joyful affirmation that Christ is coming following the focused, yearning anticipation expressed in the antiphons. It symbolizes our joy at Christ coming as a child, coming in our lives today, and coming again in future glory.

Although stanzas of the modern hymn generally correspond to the verses of the antiphon, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is an adaptation of the "O Antiphons" rather than a translation into the vernacular (i.e., common language).

From Monastery to Sanctuary: John Mason Neale

Some of our most beloved Advent hymns and Christmas carols required translation into English: "Comfort, Comfort Now My People," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," and "Silent Night, Holy Night," to name a few. Most of these translations happened in the nineteenth century, a time when the church was eagerly reclaiming texts and tunes from earlier sources, many of which were pre-Reformation. John Mason Neale made significant contributions in this effort.

John Mason Neale (1818–1866), born in London to intellectual and "very pronounced Evangelical" parents, lived in an era of industrialization, scientific advancement, and historical inquiry and discovery. His education at Trinity College at Cambridge University prepared him for a vocation as an Anglican priest and scholar. Frail health and his connection with the Oxford Movement prevented him from accepting the few parish positions offered. He served for twenty years as warden of Sackville College in East Grinstead, founded in the seventeenth century as a home for impoverished elderly men that continues to this day as a charity. That position afforded Neale opportunities to promote the church through writing, translating hymns, and founding the Sisterhood of St. Margaret's. This sisterhood sponsored an orphanage, school for middle-class girls, and a women's mission.

This era of historical inquiry and discovery influenced the Church of England through the controversial Oxford Movement, which sought to restore pre-Reformation liturgy and music. Hymns from this movement were an attempt to counterbalance the evangelical songs pervading the church. Attracted to the movement during his university days at Cambridge, Neale championed its cause for the remainder of his life. He lamented the loss of hymns from the Roman and Orthodox branches of the church:

Among the most pressing of the inconveniences consequent on the Adoption of the vernacular language in the office-books of the Reformation, must be reckoned the immediate disuse of all the hymns of the Western Church. That treasury, into which the saints of every age and country had poured their contributions, delighting, each in his

generation, to express their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows . . . became as a sealed book and as a dead letter.⁴

Neale devoted his life to translating and publishing hymns from Latin and Greek sources into English for use in the contemporary church. Thanks to his translations, congregations sing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” “Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain,” “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation,” “Creator of the Stars of Night,” “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” and “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

As the basis for his translation, Neale used a metrical (rhythmic) version of the antiphon set and added refrain as published in an eighteenth-century collection. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” first appeared as “Draw nigh, Draw nigh, Emmanuel” in *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences* (1851). Above the hymn Neale writes: “This Advent Hymn is little more than a versification of some of the Christmas antiphons commonly called the ‘O’s.’”⁵

Prayed collectively, the “Os” bring a broad list of petitions to our God of many names. These pleas, voiced by early saints in the faith, often reflect our own longings and needs.

Gaining popularity, a revised version was included in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1859–1861) with its customary opening line of “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” Today it appears in numerous hymnals and collections with varying stanzas and adaptations.

From Chants to Hymns: The Tune

Today we sing this hymn to the tune VENI EMMANUEL. If we attempt singing any of the original “Os” to this tune, we quickly discover it does not work! That is because the antiphon text is not versified; i.e., set rhythmically. By the twelfth century, a versification was in use, and the refrain appeared in an eighteenth-century publication. The plainsong (chant) used with the original antiphon set is unknown and probably lost to history. However, VENI EMMANUEL does come to us from the pages of a chantbook. Some hymnals print the tune

in unison chant style while other hymnals lay it out in metered four-part harmony.

Praying with the Antiphons

Prayed collectively, the “Os” bring a broad list of petitions to our God of many names. These pleas, voiced by early saints in the faith, often reflect our own longings and needs. Praying these antiphons as a set could prove overwhelming because of all the accumulated images and petitions in the text. One suggestion is to reflect on the original antiphon with its modern stanza and consider a contemporary application as illustrated in two of the stanzas.

“O Sapientia” names Wisdom, who was present at Creation and calls all to life (Prov. 8:4):

“O come, thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily: to us the path of knowledge show; and teach us in her ways to go.”

We live in an age where information is readily available on iPads or smartphones. Need to know something? Just “google it.” No matter how many facts we

may retain in our brains (or databases), it does not guarantee knowledge or understanding honed by experience or grounded in truth. This stanza invokes Wisdom to instruct us and lead us in paths of righteousness. She challenges us to learn prudence; attain

knowledge and discretion; shun pride, arrogance, and evil; and to walk the path of justice (Prov. 8:1–21).

After reflection, try creating your own paraphrase of this “O.” For example:

O Wisdom, come into our mad, crazy world
where information is cheap and truth is costly;
come, teach us to discern your wisdom in choices
we make
so we may show your love, justice, and mercy to
others.

“O Oriens” creates images of the radiant, dazzling brilliance that is the Light of the world:

“O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our
spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy
clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to
flight.”

Sunrise is a mystical time as daylight emerges from the darkness of night. We welcome the sun's warmth as it dissipates the night's chill. This stanza invokes the Dayspring who can lighten hearts after a sleepless night spent watching over a sick friend or family member, cheer those engulfed in grief, free those ensnared by addiction, and lift burdens of people experiencing a "dark night of the soul."

A modern "O" paraphrase:

O Dayspring, who shines in our lives like the
dazzling sun,
come, shine your light in our world of sin, pain,
and despair,
chasing away the shadows they cast on our lives.

Another way to pray the "Os" is to use another image to invoke the Messiah. Scripture includes many possibilities: O Shepherd, O Vine, O Word, O Servant, O Counselor, O Wellspring, etc.

Singing the "Os"

This hymn sings well in unison, unaccompanied or with instrumental accompaniment. Here are several suggestions for enriching the singing of this hymn. Recapture the mystery of those medieval vespers by singing this Advent hymn before and after a reading of the *Magnificat*.

Stanza of hymn

Read or recite the *Magnificat*

Repeat stanza.

Proceed until all seven stanzas, or the number agreed upon, have been sung. Another approach is to read the antiphon and then sing the corresponding stanza.

Advent is a season of waiting, waiting for the great joy realized at the coming of the Christ Child and

knowing that joy will only be exceeded by Christ's return in the fullness of time. Sing the stanzas only and delay singing the refrain until the final stanza, thus foreshadowing our exuberance when we finally sing, "Rejoice, God is with us"!

Endnotes

1. Felix Just, S. J., "'O Antiphons'" for the Week before Christmas," The Roman Catholic Lectionary Website, <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Advent-O-Antiphons.htm>.
2. All stanzas are composite translations from *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #88.
3. Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, ed., "Veni, Veni, Emmanuel," *The New Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45.
4. James E. Kiefer, "John Mason Neale, Priest, Scholar, Translator," accessed April 17, 2015, <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/220.html>.
5. Carlton Young, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 505.

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