**Sermon for Sunday 19 December 2021**

**The Advent Antiphons**

When our children were little, we used a splendid advent calendar which had all sorts of ideas for prayer each day, remembering saints and people who stood up for their faith in ways the children could relate to. They did of course especially enjoy St Nicholas on 6th December, who we celebrated with chocolate money! But the last seven days before Christmas were special too, because the calendar used the O antiphons. These O antiphons are refrains, each beginning with a title of Jesus from the Old Testament, each starting with O, which date back to the eighth century or maybe even earlier. They were sung as part of the evening office in cathedrals and monasteries across Latin speaking Europe. We are familiar with five of them today from the hymn ‘O Come O Come Emmanuel’ - which our children enjoyed singing because it has a nice easy chorus.

But more than that – we all liked the way that they signalled that Christmas was really close, finally just seven days to go! Using the O antiphons was a way of entering into the last bit of Christmas preparation with moments of stillness before the big day dawned, a bit like joining Mary in that final wait before Jesus was born, the expectancy drawing to a close. And as adults we came to enjoy the beautiful images the O antiphons conjure up, proclaiming Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. And although those prophecies are fulfilled they remain ever longing aspects of all our hearts – so I thought I would share them with you this morning, in more of a meditation than a sermon.

Our fervent prayer is: Come, Lord Jesus!

**We begin with Jesus our Wisdom**

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,

reaching from one end to the other mightily,

and sweetly ordering all things:

Come and teach us the way of prudence.

Jesus is the word of God and the Wisdom of God. In him all things are ordered and renewed.

Think of the balance of our universe: from the microscopic level up all the way to the galaxies, matter exists in complex harmonies. Our bodies are incredible masterpieces of organisation. All around us are ecosystems that support and enable life. Without order there would be nothing. Jesus is the word of God that speaks order into the chaos.

But Adam and Eve rejected God’s wisdom for the lies of the snake. As humans, we disregard the patterns and balance of the world we have been given, and we have sown disharmony between each other.

Jesus comes into creation not to condemn but to redeem. He turns our destructive ways around that we might know his wisdom again.

How is our own personal world disordered? Where have we lost wisdom? How do we need the pattern, the balance of Jesus?

Come now, Lord Jesus!

**The next antiphon reveals Jesus as our true Lord, Adonai in Hebrew**

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,

who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush

and gave him the law on Sinai:

Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

We may not see God, but he reveals himself to us. In the Old Testament, he made himself know to Moses through the burning bush, his name simply as ‘I am’. God is awe inspiring, shown forth in flames, unapproachable in holiness.

Jesus comes to fulfil the law, but he shows us God’s holiness in a very different form, poured out in loving sacrifice.

How has God made himself known to us? Through his awesome majesty, or through loving words? In the view from a mountain top, or the tiny grip of a new born baby? Do we see him as all powerful but distant, or can we come to know him through the presence of Jesus, our guide and our friend?

Come now, Lord Jesus!

**The third antiphon reveres Jesus as the heir of David, the root of Jesse**

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;

before you kings will shut their mouths,

to you the nations will make their prayer:

Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

Matthew and Luke give us long genealogies at the beginning of their gospels, which we often ignore – but for the Jewish people, how Jesus’ story fitted into theirs was important. He was an inheritor of the throne of David, the one who would complete the promises made to David.

We might not relate to all those begats, but we also need to know where we come from. Our family trees speak of our identities, our sense of belonging. Think now of your family tree, what you know of your great grandparents and how their lives contributed to yours.

Through Jesus, we are a part of the Jewish family tree: Abraham is our forefather, and David is the king that prefigures Jesus in our history. We belong in that story.

So can we find our place in history this morning? Can we see those promises fulfilled in our lives, promises of a coming King who brings justice and peace, hope and joy?

 Come now Lord Jesus!

**The fourth antiphon celebrates Jesus as the key to the kingdom**

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;

you open and no one can shut;

you shut and no one can open:

Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,

those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Jesus came to open the gates of sin and death, to release captives. Keys are potent symbols as they unlock and lock, protect and give access, start or stop. Keys make the difference between being in or being out.

You almost certainly carry keys on you this morning: what do they do? They represent our homes, our transport, keys in themselves to happiness and security, mobility and access.

Jesus is the most important “key” we have in our lives. He opens his word to us, he releases us from the burden of unforgiven sin, he takes away our fear of death.

Come now, Lord Jesus!

**The fifth antiphon gives Jesus the title of morning star, dayspring from on high.**

O Morning Star,

splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:

Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness

and the shadow of death.

Jesus is the light of the world. He shines into the darkest situation, gives hope even in the longest night. In that hour before dawn when all seems lost, he gives us strength to hang on.

Now we are very close to the shortest day of the year, and without the snow it does seem dank and gloomy. But once the solstice is past, the days do get longer again. Slowly, slowly the sun reappears! Today, we may be feeling the shadow of the valley of death, or we may just have winter blues. Where ever we are, Jesus lights our path. He brings us to a new day … a day of grace, a day of love, a day of forgiveness, a day of salvation.

Come now, Lord Jesus!

**In the sixth antiphon Jesus is proclaimed as king of the nations**

O King of the nations, and their desire,

the cornerstone making both one:

Come and save the human race,

which you fashioned from clay.

Paul says: God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Powerful, wonderful words, but do we let them sink in? Do we allow ourselves to trust in Jesus as King over all?

Our news headlines seem so recurrently depressing. The nations seem determined to become more selfish, more isolating, more inward looking. Yet Jesus is the cornerstone, he unites us all across boundaries of nationality and faith. He hasn’t given up on us, and when we look we can see signs of him at work everywhere.

Can we proclaim Jesus’ lordship in our own communities, by our love for one another? Can we watch and pray for his authority in the affairs of our nation? Are there actions that he calls us to as we see his kingdom come?

Come now, Lord Jesus!

**The final antiphon is Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us**

O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver,

the hope of the nations and their Saviour:

Come and save us, O Lord our God.

God is here, God is with us in the word made flesh. This last antiphon sums up most of the others that went before it. We ask Jesus to be with us – bringing wisdom and order, ruling over us, bringing hope, entering into our fragile human form.

Come now and save us, Lord Jesus!