

December 23: O Emmanuel (O, God with us)

Matthew ends his Gospel with word of Jesus

'Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

We are about to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world as a baby but it is good to remember the man—his life—his death—his resurrection... and this promise.

There are times in every life when we feel lost and abandoned and that God has forgotten us. This promise takes us to the heart of the meaning of the incarnation. God became human and lived among us—and he will never, ever leave or forsake us.

Our prayer focus

Those who are dreading Christmas—because of bereavement, unemployment, bad memories—and the many other reasons that surface at this time of year.

*O come, Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
come and save us, Lord our God.*

December 24

These are the darkest nights of the year in the northern hemisphere—
but the year is turning.

Soon, darkness will visibly begin to give way to increasing light.

The hope of a new dawn of life in Christ is on the horizon.

And so, praying for all who await the coming of new hope,
we pray with St Bede:

**Christ is the morning star
who when the night of this world is past
brings to his saints the promise of the light of life
and opens everlasting day.**



Hope on the Horizon

Praying the last days of Advent with the O Antiphons



Hope on the Horizon

The O Antiphons are so-called because they all start with 'O'! When we use 'oh' in daily life it is usually to add emphasis to something—like 'oh no!' or 'O, please, do not let it be them or 'oh well...'

The 'O' in the 'O Antiphons' is an expression of longing and yearning. Many of us will know the hymn based on them called 'O come, o come, Emmanuel'. It speaks of the hope of people as they wait for the coming of the Messiah into the world. It speaks of their deep desire for this to happen and to bring with it a new age of peace and justice.

The Antiphons are used during the days leading up to Christmas as the 'Alleluia' verses and introduce and conclude the praying of the Magnificat at Evening Prayer of the Church/ Vespers.

Each one looks at a different attribute—or title—of God taken from the Old Testament and reflects the difference this can make to the world.

They are:

December 17: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)

December 18: O Adonai (O Lord)

December 19: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)

December 20: O Clavis David (O Key of David)

December 21: O Oriens (O Dayspring)

December 22: O Rex Gentium (O King of the nations)

December 23: O Emmanuel (O God with us)

We will use them to reflect on our Advent theme of 'Hope on the Horizon' as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the one who came as a light to the nations and hope for all peoples. Each day will have a prayer focus—directing our thoughts to particular intentions or needs in the world today.

December 22: O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations)

The Book of Genesis tells us:

God said to Abram, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.'

The covenant God establishes with Abraham is an everlasting one. Although humanity has stretched its own side almost to breaking point, God never abandons his people. Jews, Muslims and Christians look back to this encounter and see themselves as spiritual descendants of Abraham. In his human nature, Jesus was also a descendant of Abraham—and draws all nations to himself—re-establishing this new covenant between mortals: becoming human so that humans can become divine.

Our prayer focus

People of the Abrahamic faiths (Jews, Muslims and Christians) and those of other faiths—for a renewed sense of being God's children regardless of race or nationality.

***O come, King of the peoples
and corner-stone of the Church,
come and save Man whom you made from the dust of the earth.***



Our prayer focus

Those held bound by poverty—and those who work with them.

***O come, Key of David,
who open the gates of the eternal kingdom,
come to liberate from prison
the captive who lives in darkness.***

December 21: O Oriens (O Dayspring)

The Book of Ecclesiasticus (chapter 31) offers the following advice:

Do not try to prove your strength by wine-drinking,
for wine has destroyed many.

As the furnace tests the work of the smith,
so wine tests hearts when the insolent quarrel.

Wine is very life to human beings
if taken in moderation.

What is life to one who is without wine?
It has been created to make people happy.

Wine drunk at the proper time and in moderation
is rejoicing of heart and gladness of soul.

Wine drunk to excess leads to bitterness of spirit,
to quarrels and stumbling.

It is interesting to note that the idea of addiction appears only once in the whole bible—when Paul states that church leaders should not be addicted to wine. There are, though, many references to drunkenness. Jesus was accused of being a drunkard—and Noah was also known to have had a few too many. Addiction leads people into very dark places—within themselves—and in the consequences of their addiction. It can feel as if nothing will ever be able to penetrate this darkness.

For many, though, the journey through a 12-Step programme—or a spiritual experience offers hope beyond the small horizons that their world becomes.

Our prayer focus

Those living in the darkness of addiction—and those who love them and long to bring light and hope.

***O come, Morning Star,
radiance of eternal light, sun of justice,
come and enlighten those who live in darkness
and in the shadow of death.***

December 17: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)

Today's psalm at Mass has these verses:

*Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

...

*In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*

Wisdom is a quality we value in earthly leaders. If we have a wise ruler, they will be someone who sees the needs of their people and will strive to meet them. They will not be hungry for their own power and wealth—but be concerned that none of those they govern will suffer want—or unnecessary pain—or fear.

Our prayer focus

Pray with the psalm today—dedicating your prayer for rulers and governments around the world: that they might be people of wisdom and goodness, in whose days, righteousness and justice shall flourish and peace abound for their people.

Conclude with the prayer of the O Antiphon for today:

***O come, Wisdom of the Most High,
ordering all things with strength and gentleness,
come and teach us the way of truth.***



December 18: O Adonai (O Lord)

*The Lord said to Moses,
'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard
their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their
sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians,
and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land
flowing with milk and honey...
The cry of the Israelites has now come to me;
I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.'*

Jewish people do not use the name of God but use words such as Adonai which we would probably translate as 'Lord'. Adonai is the one who hears the cry of the poor—who sees the plight of his people and responds. This incident happens even before the Jewish people had really been formed—they had no Law and no Passover—there were all to come. But they knew oppression and slavery and suffered greatly among the Egyptians of their time—a great civilisation but not given to kindness to people who were not Egyptian. Other races and nations were considered very much second-class. Adonai sees the misery of the Israelites and decides to act—to draw them from slavery into freedom. It is a long journey and the people need much healing and guidance as they adapt to their new way of life.

Our prayer focus

Those who are still bound by forms of slavery and oppression— and those who work to bring them freedom.

***O come, Ruler of the House of Israel,
who gave the law to Moses on Sinai,
come and save us with outstretched arm.***



December 19: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)

Isaiah writes:

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

*the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

...

*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

To call someone a shoot from a root does not seem very complimentary! But, to see new shoots coming from something that looked completely dead feels like something of a miracle. As Isaiah says, this is a sign to the people—that a new life is possible; that one is to come on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests and through whom salvation and justice will come anew into the world.

Our prayer focus

We pray today for new life to bloom in dead places – in our world—in our lives—in our hearts. Allow the Spirit to direct your prayer to a particular need and close with the Antiphon of the day.

***O come, Root of Jesse,
set up as a sign to the peoples,
come to save us
and delay no more.***



December 20: O Clavis David (O Key of David)

Psalm 68 sings the praise of God who sets prisoners free:

*Father of orphans and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.*

*God gives the desolate a home to live in;
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
but the rebellious live in a parched land.*

We only have to watch the news to see how vulnerable people are treated around the world. Their poverty leaves them at the mercy of people who have choices about how to treat them. Far too often, their poverty becomes a prison—a prison with no escape. This is, sadly, nothing new. The fact that a psalm written hundreds of years ago still applies today gives humanity much to be ashamed of. We may not be able to set all those held bound by poverty free— but we can work with the Lord to help to set some free from the darkness in which they live and open the door to a new, brighter future.