

## **St Giles 2022 – Advent Series: “Who Is Jesus” – Session 1: The O Antiphons – 22/11/2022**

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### **Series Introduction**

Welcome to our Advent study this year. This year we are focussing on asking “Who Jesus Is?”.

It’s a fundamental question for our faith as Christians, but also for his impact upon the world we live in today.

A disclaimer here too: It’s also not a question that we will solve in an afternoon – but instead, Christians believe that through baptism and studying and practising Jesus’ life, philosophy and actions we will live more authentic, rewarding and rich lives.

Richard J Foster, in his book “Celebration of Discipline: the path to spiritual growth” said: *“The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”*

This is why we chose to think this Advent about “who is Jesus”, during which season and through whatever medium you engage (online or in person), you might learn more about the person that Christians believe is worth following, talking to, believing in and telling other people about.

As we do, I’m going to take us back beyond the gospels and look at why Jesus became to be as famous as he did. It wasn’t only his actions, miracles or resurrection; but also that a certain group of people came to believe that Jesus was the person promised by God to the Messiah.

### **What is a messiah?**

Use the word Messiah today, and we usually think of it negatively – we might say someone has a messiah complex when they overstep the mark and have delusions of grandeur! But throughout the Old Testament (that are included in our Bibles – after several historic revisions) that originate from the Jewish Torah; there is a theme – a golden strand, if you will – that a Messiah was promised to be a saviour and liberator of the world so that all people would be drawn to God.

It is to explore this theme – the one that that is used to share Jesus’ message and stories with the world by all churches.

### **Expectations & disclaimers!**

Let me also set some expectations before we begin too. I’m going to assume (understandably – given that I am a Christian priest!) that Jesus is a real historical figure. The claim that differentiates Christians from other religions or spiritual traditions is the extraordinary claim that he is the Son of God.

In Islam, he is respected as a prophet. Mahatma Gandhi, a practising Hindu, once said famously “*I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians*”. Mostly, Judaism would regard worshipping Jesus (as one of the Trinity) to be idolatrous; at best someone that points to God (although in a misguided way).

We also know, from the gospels and other sources, that Jesus was also a practising Jew from Galilee and a wandering teacher, miracle worker and healer, and revolutionary (according to Reza Aslan’s book *Zealot*).

As we know from our faith texts, primarily the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke & later, John, he was probably a bit of all 3.

Bible scholars produce books called “concordances” to line up the stories and saying that are recorded from Jesus together. The likelihood of them being told orally before they were written down is likely – as a teaching device and history of the early followers of Jesus – who called themselves followers of the Way.

The strength of their accuracy comes from the fact that they say the same thing and tradition. There are other “gospels” or accounts that describe Jesus’ life (we’ve all probably heard of, read or seen Kate Moss’ *Labyrinth* and Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*) but the majority of churches use Mathew, Mark, Luke and John as the basis of their holy writings.

If anyone fancies further discussion, see my wife Poppy. She is the one with the MA in this. Only joking, I’m happy to talk about any of it at another time individually.

If you would like to keep your hands busy so your mind can concentrate; or want to make notes – pens, pencils and paper are over there. Just help yourself at anytime. Some people like to doodle or craft (I have been known to sit with my knitting during talks like this). Otheriwse, let’s dive in!

### **What are the O Antiphons?**

So the way I am beginning our series is by looking at the O Antiphons. Have any of you heard of them before?

If you haven’t you might know them from the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”. Have any of you heard that one?

Enya, Pentatonix, the Piano Guys, Whitney Houston, and numerous choirs, religious orders, and people have sung them. Go to Youtube or Spotify and you'll find loads! We're singing it here at some point over the next 4 weeks of Advent.

I like the version by the band *Bad Religion* myself and it can usually be heard thumping through my office in Advent. So, the O Antiphons. There are several versions of these prayers. They were mentioned by Boethius in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and even survive in AngloSaxon book of poems from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It is estimated that they were in widespread use by the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Western Christianity. These inspired some interesting meditations on the themes we look at today, and I will include a few, and some citations on these notes.

These note will be going up on St Giles' website for download.

An antiphon is a sung response – sung back and forth to each other. Traditionally, they are said or sung at Evening Prayer as an introduction to the prayer of Mary called the Magnificat.

If you ever thought Mary was a wallflower, read the words in Luke 1:46-55 and think again.



At each evening prayer from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, the O Antiphons are used before Mary's words are remembered so that these prayers prayed as countdown as the last 7 days to Christmas Day and the celebration of Christ's birth.

*Sapientia, Adonai, Radix Jesse, Clavis David, Oriens, Rex Gentium, and Emmanuel.* In fact, if you put them in order, the first letters spell out "Ero Cras" which means "I am coming soon". Very appropriate for Christmas – and something you might like to try at home.

But what do they say and what do they mean?

I've printed each of you a copy of the Antiphons (see below for website downloads).

### **Examination of the O Antiphons**

Let's take a minute or so with each prayer – I'll give some background, share a reflection, and ask a question for you to ponder as I read it out loud. At the end of the talk, I've got some questions for us to discuss or we can see where our thoughts take us.

## O Wisdom

This prayer suggests the use of the genealogy in Matthew (Matthew 1); as well as Isaiah (who we will delve into more next week). It embraces the stirring words that God's presence fully on earth might bring and holds out a hope that – despite our human understanding – there is a point to it all. The prayer announces a sense of gradual fulfilment by God, through the ages, until the sacred moment of the incarnation of the Messiah. The acclamation speaks of these events being pre-ordained 'with strength and gentleness'.

### Reflection

Each of the antiphons, as used in the Liturgy of the Word, builds on the previous one, starting with 'Wisdom'. Wisdom is a beautiful concept. On my study wall, there is a picture that says "*cling to wisdom – she will protect you. Love her – she will guard you*" (Proverbs 4:6). Some of you may disagree I have any, but it has been one of my guiding verses since I asked God the dangerous question of what he wanted me to do with my life!

When in Liverpool yesterday, I overheard a security guard in Tesco, deep in conversation with another member of staff. I overheard a snippet of conversation, in which he said: "When you die, you won't know what happens". It was a fair statement of one kind of practical wisdom but left me thinking of this prayer that looks beyond. A sonnet by Malcolm Guite – from his book of poetry *Waiting on the Word* perhaps draws our reflection deeper:

*I cannot think unless I have been thought, Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken. I cannot teach except as I am taught, Or break the bread except as I am broken. O Mind behind the mind through which I seek, O Light within the light by which I see, O Word beneath the words with which I speak, O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me, O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me, O Memory of time, reminding me, My Ground of Being, always grounding me, My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me, Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring, Come to me now, disguised as everything.*

### Question for reflection & discussion

What might we be aware of after we spiritually depart this earth? Anything? Nothing? Too busy partying? What do you think?

What wisdom would you want to share with someone that you have learned?

## O Adonai

The second antiphon is O Adonai. Adonai is one of the names of God in the old testament. Some others are Adonai, El, Elohim and Shaddai, Tzeaveot.

In modern Jewish practice, saying this name is forbidden. The name of God was so powerful that it could not be uttered – inseparable from the believed moment of creation. Hence it was shortened to the tetragrammaton and these titles, along with Ha'Shem (*“the name”*) were used as alternative to the tetragrammaton.

The other strand is that the syllables of the tetragrammaton are meant to represent the breath of life in all living things. Which is quite a profound reflection in itself, if you ask me.

The prayer directly picks up on the common source of Christianity, Islam and Judaism (known as the Abrahamic religions); in Abraham (sometimes called a patriarch along with his descendants Isaac & Jacob). The prayer picks up the encounter of the burning bush.

### Reflection

The one who is to come will be a wise and kind king and ruler, not like the rulers in the past who turned against the prophets and refused to do God's will, but rather someone who will lead the people in a benevolent way. It is a prayer of hope that places our trust in God above the authorities that we are subject to. Profoundly freeing in one way, full of quandary in another (see Jesus' answer to the Pharisees and Herodians “give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's”) and It must give God a headache to manoeuvre around the complications humans put up around us.

As the ancients looked over the Scriptures, they recalled how many times— and how many prophets— struggled to make God known as the only true God. Moses' calling at the burning bush is useful for reflection. Needing a liberator, Moses asked, “What is your name, God? What can I tell people who you are?” God's response was, “I AM who I Am.” Jesus did not claim this title, but he did flesh out God's character and his own. This is particularly strong in the gospel of John (my personal favourite). The Gospel of John notes that Jesus said of Himself, “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Bread of Life.” “I am the Way, The Truth, and the Life.”

### Questions:

Have you ever had an encounter that has changed your life? Moses did. How has it informed your actions since?

What epithet do you think people would ascribe to you? What would you like it to be?

## O Radix Jesse

The root of Jesse takes its name from Jesse – the father of King David. King David was an extraordinary figure in the Bible. He slew Goliath, was chased by the King of Israel at the time, Saul, had an extraordinarily profound relationship with Saul's son Jonathan, murdered Jezebel's husband so that he could have as his wife, was told off by the prophet Nathan, and is reputed to have composed some of the psalms.

He started out as an overlooked son of Jesse (who had a few others that were stronger, tougher, etc.) when the prophet Samuel anointed him as the shepherd-king of Israel.

The 'Root of Jesse' was given as a 'sign', and so we are now ready and anxious for the fulfilment of the long foretold events ('delay no more').

### Reflection

For many years, I didn't know what this was. It has only been the last 5 years or so that I have found out – especially through the tradition of a "Jesse Tree" and in particular the art of stained glass windows – in which this is often depicted. Selby Abbey has a lovely 13<sup>th</sup> century one.

For me, a stained glass window is exactly the right medium for this prayer. It lifts our eyes, reminds us of what has gone before, and what is illuminated as light shines through it.

I always found Isaiah's words: a stump will come forth from the tree of Jesse. It seemed a bizarre image to me – because how can that happen? But, as I have got into my own garden, I have realised that sometimes, in order for the tree to flourish and grow new shoots, pruning must happen. It certainly does with the fig tree – on which I can see the summer's crop waiting winter out to ripen already. That is not to say we can use things without a thought for the consequences. Pruning requires care, attention, and knowledge of the plant and its needs. But it does give us hope that things can be recovered; and that our eyes should have a view beyond our actions to the understandable consequences of our actions. There are always things outside of our control, but we can control our intentions and our actions. It is my hope that Advent – as a season of preparation might help us all grow this skill a little more. It is my belief that it will make us better able to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength; and our neighbours as ourselves".

Like David, the shoot of growth can come from the most unexpected places.

**Questions:** What has been the most profound period of growth in your life? Why do you feel you grew so much from who you were before?

Families are complicated. Is there a family member or friend that surprised you by their life decisions?

## O Clavis David

In this prayer, the element of kingship is emphasised, with the understanding that Jesus as Son of God will be a new kind of king. Jesus, inheritor of the throne of his ancestor, and so holder of the key of David, is to have authority over the city of David, Jerusalem, and the kingdom of Israel. The beneficence and wisdom of God's plan over the ages is brought to fulfilment in the birth of the descendant of David. The key, as well as being the symbol of authority and power, will also 'open the gates of the eternal kingdom' and so the Son of God will liberate with the grace of eternal light all who have for many ages been imprisoned by darkness.

### Reflection

A very wise priest, Alison Woodhouse, used to say to our Bible study group (and gave a card which had on it): "prayer should be the key of the morning and the lock of the night". I remembered Alison saying this with a smile. Keys are important to us. I spend most of my life trying to find where I put my keys. They were also important to the ancients. Keys open and shut. Keys unlock and lock. Keys protect and give access. Most power struggles in organisations, and history, are around who controls keys or access. Keys make the difference between being in or being out. Those who hold keys have a responsibility to use them well.

This prayer foreshadows Jesus' resurrection. Remember that Jesus, after the resurrection, shared the keys of heaven symbolically with the stumbling and hasty Peter. For Christians, Jesus is the most important "key" we have in our lives. As the ancients looked forward to Jesus coming, they looked forward to His greatest act: to use His key to open heaven to us. As Jesus was the key to their lives, he's also the key to our lives, too. He is the one who opens doors for us. He uses His keys – his teachings, parables, actions, and Holy Spirit to open the gates of heaven to our lives. He opens the door of God's love and grace... and lets each of us in.

**Questions:** How do our words, actions, and habits speak of love and grace to our neighbours? Which prisoners would you lead from prison, and why?



## O Oriens

### Background

Again, the perspective of the prayer is looking forward; praying that the morning star will 'enlighten those who live in darkness'. Its rays are 'eternal', thus promising salvation for those who dwell 'in the shadow of death'. The prophecy of the eternal kingdom descending from David (2 Samuel 7) is balanced by the remarkable 'Benedictus' prophecy of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah (Luke 1.68-79) in which the whole of salvation history up to that point is summarised in these words: 'this by the tender mercy of our God who from on high will bring the rising Sun to visit us'. Like the Magnificat of Mary, the Benedictus is a beautiful prayer of hope; often recited at Morning Prayer.

### Reflection

One of the very earliest gestures of prayer is the 'orans' (1 Timothy 2:8); following on from worship practices throughout the psalms. Lifting up our hands is a gesture of welcome, acknowledgement, inclusion. Think about it next time you thank someone for letting you out in the car, wave to a friend, or watch a priest at the altar.

This prayer, O Oriens, means "East" or translated as O Dayspring. This is the reason why most churches are built facing east – towards the rising sun. Tertullian, an early Roman writer on the early Christians, says that people often mistook them as sun-worshippers.

Our prayer also remember the wise men who brought Jesus gifts. The ancient world had a preoccupation with stars. Whole religions were based on the movements of the stars. The Magi who visited Jesus saw the star in the east and knew something important, something momentous had occurred.

This Advent, we're preparing to welcome a "star." Not a Hollywood or influencer-style star. Instead, we're preparing to welcome Jesus, the "Dawning Star." The "Dawning Star" is a special star.

It's the star that brings in a new day. Jesus, our Dawning Star, brings us a new day, too. He brings us out of the darkness of the darkest nights of the day of evil, to a new day... a day of Grace, a day of love, a day of forgiveness and reconciliation, a day of salvation.

In our service of Night Prayer (Compline) we hold the same hope when we say: Come with the dawning of the day; and make yourself known in the breaking of bread.

### Questions

What depth of emotion caused you to last raise your hands? Celebration? Frustration?

Have you ever thought about how your posture affects your perception of your task?

What values do you hold as "star quality" and resonate with in others?

## O Rex Gentium

### Background

The last two lines of this chant call to mind the creation story in the book of Genesis. “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). From dust or clay in Genesis, God has formed us for a particular purpose, namely, to share in relationship and reign with Christ, the King of the nations. Within each and every person is the desire for God. There is no escaping this reality; it is simply part and parcel of being a human person. St. Leo the Great reminds us *“Indeed, the broad scope of Christian grace has given us greater reasons for loving our neighbour. It extends to every part of the whole earth, despairing of no one and teaching that no one must be left out.”*

### Reflection

From the moment that God gave Israel its first King, King Saul, their greatest hope was that they would be a “great nation.” This hope, based on God’s promise to Abraham, was that the nation would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore.

Many of the prophets wrote how nations would stream toward Jerusalem and every nation would be subjected to Israel. These prophecies, however, were not intended to be political prophecies. Instead, they looked forward to the time when a messiah – to Christians, Jesus, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords would subject all nations to a rule of love and grace.

St. Paul, in his letter the Philippians reminds us that, as a result of Jesus’ victory over death on the cross, that “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.” (Philippians 2:9-11)

This is what the ancients wanted us to know in this O Antiphon. Please take note of the way that the rejected cornerstone becomes the focal point that completes and strengthens the whole building; and Paul’s parallel of the prisoner’s ignominious cross becomes the object of devotion for the whole world to wonder at. They wanted everyone everywhere to know Jesus is not just a King. He’s the King of King’s. We can also draw parallels to the moral Jesus gives us at the end of his parable about the wicked tenants of a vineyard (Matthew 21). Jesus says: *“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit”* and quotes psalm 118: 22 about the rejected stone becoming the most useful. Advent is a time of preparation for a renewed year of service, charity and – to use an old fashioned word – repentance. To consider the old year, mend the fences that have been broken, and apologise for our misdemeanours ahead of the new hope Christ brings us.

### Questions

How are we preparing ourselves for the Christmas celebrations?

Are we ready to honestly address the failings in society, our world, and ourselves?

## **O Emmanuel**

### **Background**

One particularly mysterious influence on this antiphon is the comparison and linking of Jesus with the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19). In Genesis 14: 18-20, Melchizedek, a mysterious King of Salem appears, offers bread and wine in worship to “God Most High”, blesses Abraham and then withdraws. The only other mention of him is in Psalm 110. One of the likely links in this prayer is to allude to Jesus fulfilling the law with it’s Levitical (original family line of priests from the covenant on Mount Sinai) and also temple sacrifices (proscribed in the Old Testament law for governing a people in the wilderness). Bread and wine replace those sacrifices and “a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God” (Hebrews 7:19). Both Melchizedek, and Jesus, often appear and bless in just as mysterious ways.

### **Reflection**

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” – which is back where we started out – will be the first hymn at the 10:30 service in St Giles on the 4<sup>th</sup> December.

‘He shall be called Emmanuel – God with us’. That is what Joseph was told by the angel. So we call him by that name in the last of the O antiphons – God with us. His presence is not just fact of history but a fact of today. His presence is salvation for us, now. He is always with us. He always offers us a new beginning. That is what Christmas reminds us of.

After this day, there are no more O antiphons. Christmas will arrive and we will no longer require the pause that comes with an “O”. At Christmas we know that the Lord will come and his people *should be inspired* to make the wonder, mystery and potential seen in a newborn child known through our lives – because he was born to remind us of that which is within ourselves. St Leo the Great said in his Christmas sermon: “*Christian be aware of your nobility – it is God’s own nature that you share*”. So we pray that God’s salvation will be worked in us – and among us. There is one quote that always make me reflect on the wonder of God coming to be with us and what it might bring. St Athanasius, with a lovely turn of phrase: “He became what we are, so that we might become what he is”.

### **Questions**

How do you feel the presence of God in your mind and heart?

Who could you bless today – in complete surprise?



### **O Sapientia**

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.

*(referencing Ecclesiasticus 24:3; Wisdom 8:1)*

### **O Adonai**

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.

*(referencing Exodus 3.2; 24.12)*

### **O Radix 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.

*(referencing Isaiah 11. 10; 45. 14; 52.15; Romans 15.12)*

### **O Clavis David**

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.

*(referencing Isaiah 22.2; 42;7)*

### **O Oriens**

O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

*(referencing Malachi 4.2)*

### **O Rex Gentium**

O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one: come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.

*(referencing Isaiah 28: 16; Ephesians 2:14).*

### **O Emmanuel**

O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their saviour: come and save us, O Lord our God.

*(referencing Isaiah 7.14)*