

fested in creation. All creatures are called to join in this song of praise, and so the Psalm also contains the invitation: "Let all the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes" (v. 12ff.).

The Church reads this Psalm as a prophecy and also as a task. The coming of God to Bethlehem took place in silence. Only the shepherds keeping watch were, for a moment, surrounded by the light-filled radiance of his presence and could listen to something of that new song, born of the wonder and joy of the angels at God's coming.

This silent coming of God's glory continues throughout the centuries. Wherever there is faith, wherever his word is proclaimed and heard, there God gathers people together and gives himself to them in his Body; he makes them his Body. God "comes".

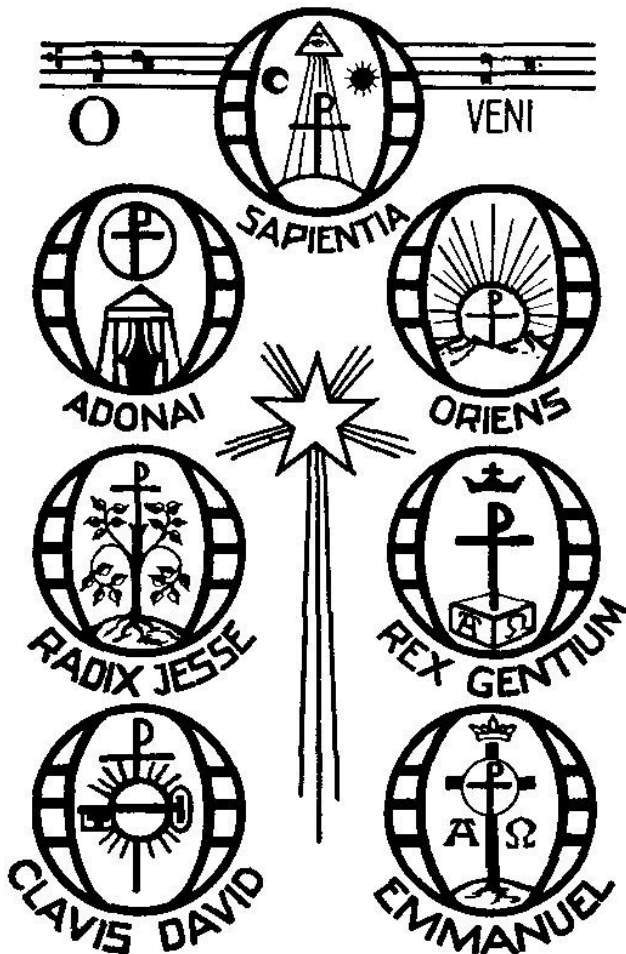
And in this way our hearts are awakened. The new song of the angels becomes the song of all those who, throughout the centuries, sing ever anew of God's coming as a child – and rejoice deep in their hearts.

And the trees of the wood go out to him and exult. The tree in Saint Peter's Square speaks of him, it wants to reflect his splendour and to say: Yes, he has come, and the trees of the wood acclaim him.

The trees in the cities and in our homes should be something more than a festive custom: they point to the One who is the reason for our joy – the God who for our sake became a child.

In the end, this song of praise, at the deepest level, speaks of him who is the very tree of new-found life. Through faith in him we receive life. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist he gives himself to us – he gives us a life that reaches into eternity.

At this hour we join in creation's song of praise, and our praise is at the same time a prayer: Yes, Lord, help us to see something of the splendour of your glory. And grant peace on earth. Make us men and women of your peace. Amen.



The importance of the "Great O Antiphons" is twofold: each one is a title for the Messiah and each one refers to the prophecy of Isaiah and other Old Testament Scripture passages foretelling the coming of the Messiah. These ancient texts from sacred Scripture sung as verses before and after the Magnificat at Vespers in the Divine Office. The Great O Antiphons are characteristically "Benedictine" in nature because they flourished in the monastic liturgy with great élan. One can't think of the Advent observance without thinking of the Great O Antiphons.

God has become man. He has become a child. Thus he fulfills the great and mysterious promise to be Emmanuel: God-with us. Now he is no longer unreachable for anybody. God is Emmanuel. By becoming a child, he offers us the possibility of being on familiar terms with him.

I am reminded here of a rabbinical tale recorded by Elie Wiesel. He tells of Jehel, a little boy, who comes running into the room of his grandfather, the famous Rabbi Baruch. Big tears are rolling down his cheeks. And he cries, My friend has totally given up on me. He is very unfair and very mean to me. Well, could you explain this a little more? asks the master.

Okay, responds the little boy. We were playing hide and seek. I was hiding so well that he could not find me. But then he simply gave up and went home. Isn't that mean? The most exciting hiding place has lost its excitement because the other shops playing.

The master caresses the boy's face. He himself now has tears in his eyes. And he says, Yes, this is not nice. But look, it is the same way with God. He is in hiding, and we do not seek him. Just imagine! God is hiding, and we people do not even look for him.

In this little story a Christian is able to find the key to the ancient mystery of Christmas. God is in hiding. He waits for his creation to set out toward him, he waits for a new and willing Yes to come about, for love to arise as a new reality out of his creation. He waits for man.

Benedictus

Pope Benedict XVI

And who are these people of his good will if not the poor, the watchful, the expectant, those who hope in God's goodness and seek him, looking to him from afar?

The Fathers of the Church offer a remarkable commentary on the song that the angels sang to greet the Redeemer. Until that moment – the Fathers say – the angels had known God in the grandeur of the universe, in the reason and the beauty of the cosmos that come from him and are a reflection of him. They had heard, so to speak, creation's silent song of praise and had transformed it into celestial music. But now something new had happened, something that astounded them. The One of whom the universe speaks, the God who sustains all things and bears them in his hands – he himself had entered into human history, he had become someone who acts and suffers within history. From the joyful amazement that this unimaginable event called forth, from God's new and further way of making himself known – say the Fathers – a new song was born, one verse of which the Christmas Gospel has preserved for us: “Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace to his people on earth”.

We might say that, following the structure of Hebrew poetry, the two halves of this double verse say essentially the same thing, but from a different perspective. God's glory is in the highest heavens, but his high state is now found in the stable – what was lowly has now become sublime. God's glory is on the earth, it is the glory of humility and love. And even more: the glory of God is peace. Wherever he is, there is peace. He is present wherever human beings do not attempt, apart from him, and even violently, to turn earth into heaven. He is with those of watchful hearts; with the humble and those who meet him at the level of his own “height”, the height of humility and love. To these people he gives his peace, so that through them, peace can enter this world.

The medieval theologian William of Saint Thierry once said that God – from the time of Adam – saw that his grandeur provoked resistance in man, that we felt limited in our own being and threatened in our freedom. Therefore God chose a new way. He became a child. He made himself dependent and weak, in need of our love. Now – this God who has become a child says to us – you can no longer fear me, you can only love me. With these thoughts, we draw near this night to the child of Bethlehem – to the God who for our sake chose to become a child. In every child we see something of the Child of Bethlehem. Every child asks for our love.

This night, then, let us think especially of those children who are denied the love of their parents. Let us think of those street children who do not have the blessing of a family home, of those children who are brutally exploited as soldiers and made instruments of violence, instead of messengers of reconciliation and peace.

Let us think of those children who are victims of the industry of pornography and every other appalling form of abuse, and thus are traumatized in the depths of their soul.

The Child of Bethlehem summons us once again to do everything in our power to put an end to the suffering of these children; to do everything possible to make the light of Bethlehem touch the heart of every man and woman.

Only through the conversion of hearts, only through a change in the depths of our hearts can the cause of all this evil be overcome, only thus can the power of the evil one be defeated.

Only if people change will the world change; and in order to change, people need the light that comes from God, the light which so unexpectedly entered into our night.

And speaking of the Child of Bethlehem, let us think also of the place named Bethlehem, of the land in which Jesus lived, and which he loved so deeply. And let us pray that peace will be established there, that hatred and violence will cease.

Let us pray for mutual understanding, that hearts will be opened, so that borders can be opened. Let us pray that peace will descend there, the peace of which the angels sang that night.

In Psalm 96 [95], Israel, and the Church, praises God's grandeur mani-

THE HOLY FATHER'S CHRISTMAS HOMILY 12/24/2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?”

This is what Israel sings in one of the Psalms (113 [112], 5ff.), praising God’s grandeur as well as his loving closeness to humanity. God dwells on high, yet he stoops down to us... God is infinitely great, and far, far above us. This is our first experience of him.

The distance seems infinite. The Creator of the universe, the one who guides all things, is very far from us: or so he seems at the beginning. But then comes the surprising realization: The One who has no equal, who “is seated on high”, looks down upon us. He stoops down. He sees us, and he sees me.

God’s looking down is much more than simply seeing from above. God’s looking is active. The fact that he sees me, that he looks at me, transforms me and the world around me. The Psalm tells us this in the following verse: “He raises the poor from the dust...” In looking down, he raises me up, he takes me gently by the hand and helps me – me! – to rise from depths towards the heights.

“God stoops down”. This is a prophetic word. That night in Bethlehem, it took on a completely new meaning. God’s stooping down became real in a way previously inconceivable. He stoops down – he himself comes down as a child to the lowly stable, the symbol of all humanity’s neediness and forsakenness. God truly comes down. He becomes a child and puts himself in the state of complete dependence typical of a newborn child. The Creator who holds all things in his hands, on whom we all depend, makes himself small and in need of human love. God is in the stable.

In the Old Testament the Temple was considered almost as God’s footstool; the sacred ark was the place in which he was mysteriously present in the midst of men and women. Above the temple, hidden, stood the cloud of God’s glory.

Now it stands above the stable. God is in the cloud of the poverty of a homeless child: an impenetrable cloud, and yet – a cloud of glory! How, indeed, could his love for humanity, his solicitude for us, have appeared greater and more pure?

The cloud of hiddenness, the cloud of the poverty of a child totally in need of love, is at the same time the cloud of glory. For nothing can be more sublime, nothing greater than the love which thus stoops down, descends, becomes dependent. The glory of the true God becomes visible when the eyes of our hearts are opened before the stable of Bethlehem.

Saint Luke’s account of the Christmas story, which we have just heard in the Gospel, tells us that God first raised the veil of his hiddenness to people of very lowly status, people who were looked down upon by society at large – to shepherds looking after their flocks in the fields around Bethlehem. Luke tells us that they were “keeping watch”. This phrase reminds us of a central theme of Jesus’s message, which insistently bids us to keep watch, even to the Agony in the Garden – the command to stay awake, to recognize the Lord’s coming, and to be prepared.

Here too the expression seems to imply more than simply being physically awake during the night hour. The shepherds were truly “watchful” people, with a lively sense of God and of his closeness. They were waiting for God, and were not resigned to his apparent remoteness from their everyday lives. To a watchful heart, the news of great joy can be proclaimed: for you this night the Saviour is born. Only a watchful heart is able to believe the message. Only a watchful heart can instill the courage to set out to find God in the form of a baby in a stable. Let us ask the Lord to help us, too, to become a “watchful” people.

Saint Luke tells us, moreover, that the shepherds themselves were “surrounded” by the glory of God, by the cloud of light. They found themselves caught up in the glory that shone around them. Enveloped by the holy cloud, they heard the angels’ song of praise: “Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace on earth to people of his good will”.



The Great Antiphon for December 17

O Sapientia

O Wisdom, who came from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti, attingens a fine usque ad finem, fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia: veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.

Ecclesiastes 24:5; Isaiah 11: 2-3; 40:14; Sirach 24:2, 30; Wisdom 8:1.

Symbols: oil lamp, open book.

On December 17th we enter into that final stretch of our Advent preparation. In the Church's solemn prayer of the hours, at Vespers, the great "O Antiphons" are sung. Today we have the first.

The Son is Eternal. There was never a time when He was not. Through Him all things were made. Through Him order was given to the primal chaos. Thus, the marvelous and sweet order we observe in the universe is due to the eternal wisdom of the eternal Word. That same well-ordering eternal Word is the Word made flesh, who dwell among us beginning with His coming birth at Bethlehem.

In today's "O Antiphon" - "*O Sapientia*" - we are drawn into the Old Testament's wisdom literature. Wisdom is a divine attribute. The divine Wisdom is personified. Wisdom is the beloved daughter who was before Creation, Wisdom is the breath of God's power, Wisdom is the shining of God's (transforming) glory. (See Sirach 24:3 and Wisdom 8:1.)

Wisdom is also something which we deeply desire. It is also a human attribute, not just a divine attribute, though authentic human wisdom is never separated from a relationship with God. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, as we learn from the psalms as well as the school of personal hard-knocks. From this convergence of awesome respect for God with the experience of learning through life's mysterious calendar, we understand (if we are wise) that wisdom is more than mere knowledge. It is something more than love. It is something more than just a special astuteness regarding how to get along in life, a certain kind of *savior faire*. Rooted as it is in fear of the Lord, true human wisdom is both love *and* that knowledge of God that seeks to understand, the knowledge that is completed by faith.

The Prologue of John's Gospel refers to the "*Verbum caro factum...the Word made flesh*". He is the divine Logos... the eternal thought/word/reason. Through Him all things were made. Without Him nothing can be. So, the New Testament image in the Prologue of John brings to completion the imagery of Wisdom. He, the Word, is the archetype of the material universe. All things are ordered in and to Him.

Our lives, to be happy, need order. Our individual private lives and our collective lives in larger society must have structure and order. They must be disposed in such a way that the real and genuine good of all is fostered and promoted. Thus, in human governance we struggle to find the proper balance of exercise of power (without which governance and order is not possible) and gentle concern for the individual and community (without which there is mere imposition and tyranny and exploitation for some end material or ideological). Wisdom permits the balance of these.

This first "O Antiphon" shows us the Creator of all that is invisible and visible, the whole of spiritual and material creation. It is moving according to an eternally disposed plan of divine Providence toward an inexorable end: that God may be all in all. In this end the blessed elect will participate. We have had the way opened for us toward this end



The Great Antiphon for December 23

O Emmanuel

O Emmanuel (God with us), our King and lawgiver, the expectation of the nations and their Savior: come to save us, O Lord our God.

O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster, expectatio gentium, et Salvator earum: veni ad salvandum nos Domine Deus noster.

Isaiah 7:14; 8:8 / Matthew 1:23 / Haggai 2:7



The Great Antiphon for December 22

O Rex Gentium

O King of the Gentiles and their desired
 One, the Cornerstone that makes both one:
 Come, and deliver man, whom You formed out
 of the dust of the earth.

*O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum,
 lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum:
 veni, et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti.*

Psalm 2:7-8; Haggai 2:8; Genesis 2:7; Ephesians 2:14-20.

Symbols, Crown, scepter.

by the Word (divine) made flesh (human). Our humanity now sits in transformed glory at the right hand of the Father in an indestructible bond with the Son's divinity. The risen Christ is the new Adam...the new Creation. With unspeakable sweetness He orders our salvation. With irresistible power all things exist and move according to His will. Our lives have meaning only in Him, according to His guidance, who handles us "*suaviter et fortiter*".

Our Old Testament and New Testament figures and images merge into a new point of reflection for our lives which today's "O Antiphon" underscores as "prudence" - "Come...Teach us the way of prudence!"

"Prudence" comes from the Latin "to see/look ahead". It is one of the four "cardinal" virtues, one which other virtues depend. Prudence is a habit of the intellect that allows us to see in any circumstance what is virtuous and what is not. Prudence helps us to seek what is virtuous and avoid what is not. Prudence perfects the intellect (rather than the will) in practical decisions. It determines which course of action must be taken. It indicates what the golden mean is *hic et nunc*...here and now. This mean is at the core of every virtue. Without the virtue of prudence courage becomes foolhardiness... rushing in to the wrong danger in the wrong way at the wrong time. Without the governing of prudence mercy devolves into slackness and enervated weakness, spinelessness.

But this is still a kind of prudence which is merely human prudence, not looking beyond the issues of daily life. We must also look beyond this vale of tears. In addition to the prudence which grows out of the school of hard-knocks and which becomes a sound and good habit through repeated acts, there is another prudence, an "infused" prudence. This kind of prudence is a grace given us by God out of His merciful love. This greater prudence, which governs other grace-filled virtues, cannot be separated from the life of grace. It is exercised in the state of grace. Mortal sin is its enemy. This higher kind of prudence helps us to determine the proper things that help us to salvation. It helps us to avoid things that slam the door that Christ opened (mortal sin). Thus, prudence cannot be separated from charity, which is in the soul as a characteristic of sanctifying (habitual) grace.

Today in the opening "O Antiphon" we sing to Emmanuel who is coming. We plead with Him, for He orders all things "sweetly and strongly." He teaches us how to avoid things that harm us, both in material concerns and in our pursuit of the happiness of heaven. He teaches us true prudence.

Take stock: is there something going on in my life that needs to be examined in prudence? Am I doing something which is going to be an obstacle to the happiness of heaven? Christ is coming, both at Christmas as the infant King and the end of the world as the Judge and King of fearful majesty. This is a cause to rejoice. But it is also cause to prepare prudently and well the way of the Lord and make straight His paths *before* He comes, as we heard about on "Gaudete" ("Rejoice!") Sunday of Advent.



The Great Antiphon for December 18

O Adonai

O Lord and Ruler of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come, and redeem us with outstretched arm.

O Adonai, et dux domus Israëel, qui Moyse in igne flammae rubi apparuisti, et ei in Sina legem dedisti: veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.

Isaiah 11:4-5; Exodus 6:13; 3:2, 20:1; Jeremiah 32:21.

Symbols: burning bush, stone tablets.

O Oriens

We are all desperately in need of a Savior, a Redeemer who is capable of ransoming from the darkness of our sins and from the blinding and numbing wound of ignorance from which we all suffer. In their terrible Fall, our First Parents inflicted grave wounds in the souls of every person who would live after them, except of course - by an act of singular grace - the Mother of God. Our wills are damaged. Our intellect is clouded. In Christ we have the Truth, the sure foundation of what is lasting. All else, apart from Him fails and fades into dark obscurity. He brings clarity and light back to our souls when we are baptized or when we return to Him through the sacrament of penance.

At Holy Mass of the ancient Church, Christians would face "East", at least symbolically, so that they could greet the Coming of the Savior, both in the consecration of the bread and wine and in the expectation of the glorious return of the King of Glory. They turned to the rising sun who is Justice Itself, whose light will lay bare the truth of our every word, thought and deed in the Final Day.

This is the Solstice day, for the Northern Hemisphere the day which provides us with the least daylight of the year. From this point onward in the globe's majestic arc about the sun, we of the north, benefit from increasing warmth and illumination. It is as if God in His Wisdom, provided within the framework of the cosmos object lessons by which we might come to grasp something of His good plan for our salvation.

Let us turn to the LIGHT, repent our evil ways and habits, and grasp onto Christ in His Holy Church, for as we read in Scripture:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."

John 3:16-21 (RSV)



The Great Antiphon for December 21

O Oriens

O Dawn of the East, brightness of the light eternal, and Sun of Justice: Come, and enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae: veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.

Zac 6:12; Habakkuk 3:4; Malachi 3:20; Psalm 19:6-7; 107:10; Luke 1:78.

Symbol: rising sun.

"Adonai" is "LORD." It was the Hebrew word that the Jews used when they found the four-lettered word for God's name which they held to be too sacred to pronounce aloud. Christ is Lord of Creation. We sang this yesterday in the antiphon "*O Sapientia*". Christ is also Lord of the Covenant with the People He chose. The Lord made covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. He guided them and all the People. He gave them Law. He protected and feed them. The Lord delivered them from bondage to Pharaoh and unending slavery. He went before them with arm outstretched.

This was all a pre-figuring of the great work of redemptions that Christ would work on the Cross. He redeemed us His People from Satan and the eternal damnation of hell. He once appeared clothed in the burning bush that was not consumed by fire. He is about to appear again clothed in flesh in our liturgical celebration of Christmas. He will appear again one day in the future to judge the living and the dead. Each day He appears to us in the person of our neighbor.

What amazing contrasts we find in our Lord! He came in thunder and lightening to give the Law on Mt. Sinai. He comes now in swaddling clothes. He will come again in glory. He comes humbly in the appearance of Bread and Wine.

He still goes before us with outstretched arm and our foes are put to flight at the sight of His banner.

O Root of Jesse

What urgency there is this antiphon. Something that lies below the earth (a root) stands high unto the heavens like a banner! *Vexilia Regis Prodeunt* we sing in Lent... what is a little root during Advent becomes by Lent the Tree of our salvation. Isaiah 11:10 gives us imagery for our reflection today. The great prophet of Advent tells us that the kingdom of David would be destroyed, but not entirely destroyed. A root would remain. Jesse is David's father. David is Jesse's root. David leads to Christ. After the destruction there remains a root. No matter what the exigencies of life present to us or how turbulent the vicissitudes of the passing world may be, when we cling to the root we are sure to be victorious in the end.



The Great Antiphon for December 19

O Radix Jesse

O Root of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence and unto whom the Gentiles shall make supplication: Come to deliver us, and tarry not.

O Radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum, super quem continebunt reges os suum, quem Gentes deprecabuntur: veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare.

Isaiah 11:1-3; 10; 52:15; Habakkuk 2:3.

Symbol: vine or plant in flower, especially a rose.



The Great Antiphon for December 20

O Clavis David

O Key of David, and Scepter of the House of Israel, who opens and no man shuts, who shuts and no man opens: Come, and bring forth the captive from his prison, he who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death.

O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel; qui aperis, et nemo claudit; claudis, et nemo aperit: veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris, sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.

Revelation 3:7; Isaiah 22:22; Psalm 107:10.
Symbols: key; broken chains.