

Food for the Journey

Advent Antiphons

Sung before and after the Magnificat at Evening Prayer and used as Alleluia verses at Mass

17th December – *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. *Sir 24:3; Wis 8:1*

18th December – *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. *cf Ex 3:2, 24:12*

19th December – *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. *cf Is 11:10, 45:14, 52:15; Rom 15:12*

20th December – *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. *cf Is 22:22, 42:7*

21st December – *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. *cf Mal 4:2*

22nd December – **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. *cf Is 28:16; Eph 2:14*

23rd December – *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. *cf Is 7:14*

*The first letters of the Latin titles taken backwards (E-R-O-C-R-A-S) form a Latin acrostic - **Ero Cras** which translates as 'Tomorrow, I will be [there]', mirroring the theme of the antiphons.*

O Sapientia [*O Wisdom*]

17th December

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.

Sir 24:3; Wis 8:1

Reading

Genesis 49:2, 8-10

The Sceptre shall not depart from Judah

² Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob,
and hearken to Israel your father...

⁸ Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons shall bow down before you.

⁹ Judah is a lion's whelp;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down, he couched as a lion,
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him up?

¹⁰ The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Reflection

THE ADVENT Antiphons, sometimes known as 'the Great 'O's', are seven titles of the Messiah, distilled from the Old Testament. He is Adonai, or leader of the House of Israel. He is the Root of Jesse, from which sprung the House of David. He is the Key of David, unlocking the gates of death. He is the Morning Star, heralding the Dawn. He is the King of the Nations and he is Emmanuel, God-with-us. What is striking about all these descriptions is that implicitly they are descriptions of Almighty God. The final one – God-with-us – celebrates the central theological truth for Christians that God in Christ took our flesh and dwelt – or rather 'dwells' – in our midst. In today's first reading, we are right back in pre-history, in the time of the patriarchs. Here Jacob, known as Israel, is saying farewell to his sons. He is dying but not before prophesying the fortunes of Judah. He would have had no way of knowing or guessing that the future of Judah would present itself as the Son of God but he knew that the sceptre of Judah, the symbol of kingship, would be one to whom 'shall be the obedience of the peoples'.

O Adonai

18th December

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.
cf Ex 3:2, 24:12

Reading

Jeremiah 23:5-8

The Righteous Branch of David

⁵ 'Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

⁷ 'Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when men shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' ⁸ but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land.'

Reflection

IN THE seven days leading up to Christmas, one might imagine that the readings would match the Advent Antiphon of the day. Today the Antiphon is O Adonai and point us further back to God revealing himself to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. The first reading, by contrast, refers us to the Son of David, who saves Judah and Israel, bringing them back from exile back to their own land. This second Exodus – this time not from Egypt but from Babylon – becomes a new and important point of reference, more important, Jeremiah seems to say, than the first Exodus. God the deliverer is described as 'The Lord our Righteousness' (v.6) which is a play on the name Zedekiah, the puppet king who rebelled against the Babylonians, leading to the destruction of Jerusalem.

O Radix [*O Root of Jesse*]

19th December

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.

cf Is 11:10, 45:14, 52:15; Rom 15:12

Reading

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25

The story of Sampson

² And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Mano'ah; and his wife was barren and had no children. ³ And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Behold, you are barren and have no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son. ⁴ Therefore beware, and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, ⁵ for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.' ⁶ Then the woman came and told her husband, 'A man of God came to me, and his countenance was like the countenance of the angel of God, very terrible; I did not ask him whence he was, and he did not tell me his name; ⁷ but he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son; so then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.'

²⁴ And the woman bore a son, and called his name Samson; and the boy grew, and the LORD blessed him. ²⁵ And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him.

Reflection

AS WE continue to reflect on the way the Hebrew Scriptures point towards the coming of the Messiah, we take in a couple of the heroes of Israelite history. These heroes – Samson today and Samuel on 22nd December – are shadows of what is to come. Samson is the mighty warrior who slays Goliath. Samuel is the great prophet who anoints David as King of Israel. We see the specific – Samson's fight against the Philistines and David's reign over Israel – as pointing towards something more universal. The Messiah – Jesus – will fight against sin and death, and like Samson, lose his life in the process. The Messiah – Jesus – like Samuel will establish a new Kingdom, not in time but in eternity.

O Clavis David [*O Key of David*]

20th December

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.

cf Is 22:22, 42:7

READING

Isaiah 7:10-14

The Virgin is with Child

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ 'Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.' ¹² But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.' ¹³ And he said, 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emman'u-el.

Reflection

THE PROPHET is one who sees both the present and the future with a keen and usually uncomfortable eye. In today's reading, Isaiah counsels King Ahaz about the danger of joining a union of small states against the might of Assyria. That coalition, says Isaiah, will fail and, far from preserving Judah's independence, make matters worse. If the prophet's analysis of the present is grim, he nonetheless looks to the future with hope. The prophecy of Emmanuel ('God-with-us') happens three times in Isaiah (7:14; 8:8; 8:10). It is not so much a comfort for present difficulties as the guarantee of a future favourable outcome. Ahaz needs to do nothing to save his nation but have confidence in God's words of assurance. The relevance for us is not only the passage pointing to the birth of the Messiah, as the Church has traditionally interpreted it, but the knowledge that God is with us and will be with us in all circumstances, in all our difficulties.

O Oriens [*O Morning Star*]

21st December

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

Mal 4:2

Reading

Song of Songs 2:8-14

My beloved comes leaping over the Mountains

My beloved is like a gazelle,
or a young stag.

Behold, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me:

'Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

¹¹ for behold, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.

¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is comely.

Reflection

SONG OF SONGS means 'the best of all songs'. Sometimes known as 'The Song of Solomon', because the book is dedicated to Solomon, we are here looking at something from the Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible.

We can only guess when the book was written and can only marvel at its poetry. It is always a surprise to discover that it is the one book in the Bible that makes no mention of God. The characters seem to be the Man, the Woman, and the Daughters of Jerusalem – and that is made clear in the different Hebrew verb forms. Jewish tradition has always associated this love song as an allegory of the love of God and the covenant people, Israel. Christian thought re-interprets that as the love of God and the Church, the New Israel. Today's reading is a description of the delight of lovers in Springtime and, as Christmas approaches, we look forward to celebrating afresh the outpouring of God's love for us in Christ.

O Rex Gentium [*O King of the Nations*] **22nd December**

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

cf Is 28:16; Eph 2:14

Reading

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise

Mary said:

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
⁵² he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.'

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and returned to her home.

Reflection

THE MAGNIFICAT, as this Gospel passage from St Luke is called, is a hymn from the mouth of Mary when she visited her cousin Elizabeth. At the time, Elizabeth was six months' pregnant with the son of her old age, John later called 'the Baptist'. Mary's canticle is based on the Song of Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet, Samuel, (1 Sam 2:1-10), but greatly enriched by other biblical allusions, such as the use of phrases from the Psalms. It was customary for Hellenistic historians to use speeches to summarise conversations and events and St Luke shows himself to be such an historian. The importance of the *Magnificat* is that it is a prospectus for the coming Kingdom of God, in which values are turned upside down. This prospectus, together with Our Lady's statement, 'All generations shall call me blessed', is why the canticle forms the climax each day of the Evening Office of Vespers. Mary's words are those of the faithful daughter of Israel. In that sense, she speaks not just for herself but for the whole People of God. God is described in the canticle as 'Lord', 'Saviour', and 'Holy'. Each of these titles has been applied (Luke 1:34, 1:43) or will be applied (2:11) to Jesus. The Child about to be born is indeed Almighty God.

O Emmanuel

23rd December

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

cf Is 7:14

Reading

Luke 1:57-66

The Birth of John the Baptist

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbours and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechari'ah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother said, 'Not so; he shall be called John.' ⁶¹ And they said to her, 'None of your kindred is called by this name.' ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they all marvelled. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all

their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection

BEFORE we get to the birth of Jesus, the Infancy Narratives at the beginning of St Luke's Gospel give us the account of the birth and naming of his older cousin, St John the Baptist. The birth of John and Jesus, sixth months apart, are preceded by the announcement of the pregnancy of Elizabeth and Mary. There was the encounter of Zechariah, John's father, with the angel Gabriel in the temple at Jerusalem, at the offering of incense, Zechariah's priestly task. And there was the encounter of Mary with Gabriel at Nazareth, announcing her overshadowing by the Holy Spirit. The difference between these two angelic encounters are significant. One was to an important person, a Jerusalem priest and the other to a girl in an obscure Galilean village. One was to an elderly childless man and the other to a young woman, only just old enough, we presume, for the responsibilities of motherhood. One was to an incredulous man, who was struck dumb by the news. The other was to a young woman, happy to obey and trust even what she could not begin to understand. And so, in the story of the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah has the opportunity to recover his powers of speech by expressing his faith and confidence in God first writing on a tablet. He and Elizabeth decline to follow tradition and give their son a family name and so name their son John, the name given to them by the angel.

Christmas Eve

24th December

Reading

Luke 1:67-79

Zechariah's Prophecy

⁶⁷ And John's father Zechari'ah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies,

and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,
74 to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our
enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of
death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Reflection

THE THREE passages from St Luke used as canticles or hymns in the Divine Office are *Magnificat* (the Song of Mary) which we encountered on Tuesday 22nd, *Benedictus* (the Song of Zechariah) which we have heard today, and *Nunc Dimittis* (the Song of Simeon) which we shall use at Candlemas (Lk 2:29-32). *Benedictus* is the climax of Lauds, *Magnificat* the climax of Vespers, *Nunc Dimittis* the climax of Compline. These three canticles link the daily prayer of the Church to the Incarnation: God taking our flesh and living in our midst. *Benedictus* takes the form of a traditional Jewish blessing. It begins with God visiting and redeeming Israel, his people. God raises up the horn of salvation to herald the dawning day – the dayspring – from on high, a dawning not of military conquest and political freedom but of a transformation of values, such as was laid out for us in *Magnificat*. This will be heralded by the little child – the infant prophet John the Baptist – who will point to the coming of light, life, and peace.
