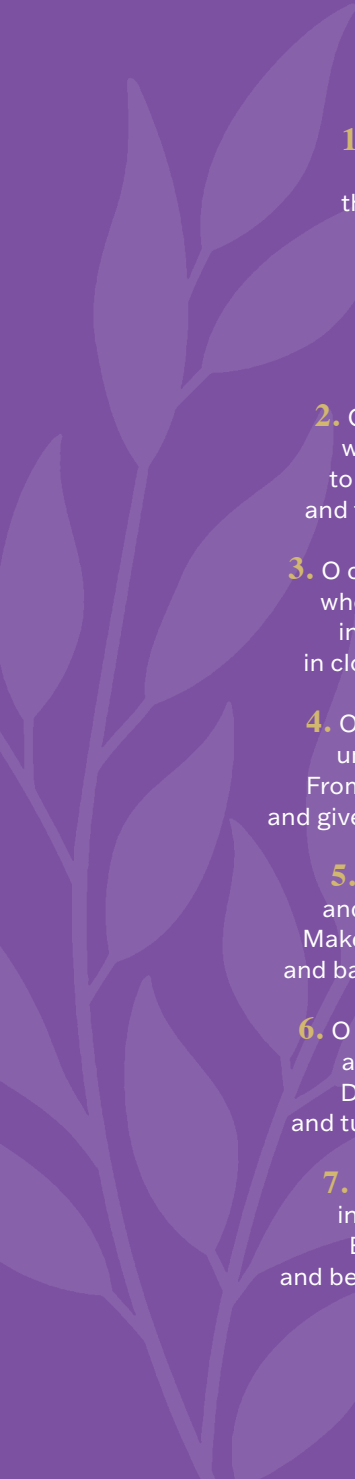




O Come O Come Emmanuel
Advent Reflections

2023
Fr David Ranson VG



1. O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

**Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.**

- 2.** O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. *Refrain*
- 3.** O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe. *Refrain*
- 4.** O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,
unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave. *Refrain*
- 5.** O come, O Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road
and bar the way to death's abode. *Refrain*
- 6.** O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light. *Refrain*
- 7.** O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace. *Refrain*

The Christmas hymn with which we are so familiar brings to melody what in our Catholic Advent Liturgy are known as the O Antiphons. There are the great Magnificat antiphons used at the Church's Evening Prayer on the last seven days of Advent. They likely date to sixth-century Italy, when the philosopher, Boethius refers to the text in his *The Consolation of Philosophy*. They subsequently became one of the key musical features of the days leading up to Christmas. Each text, in the original Latin, begins with the vocative particle "O". Each antiphon is a name of Christ, one of his attributes mentioned in Scripture.

They are:

- 17 December: **O Sapientia** (O Wisdom)
- 18 December: **O Adonai** (O Lord)
- 19 December: **O Radix Jesse** (O Root of Jesse)
- 20 December: **O Clavis David** (O Key of David)
- 21 December: **O Oriens** (O Dayspring)
- 22 December: **O Rex Gentium** (O King of the Nations)
- 23 December: **O Emmanuel** (O With Us is God)

The first letters of the titles, from last to first, appear to form what is known as a Latin acrostic 'Ero cras', meaning 'Tomorrow, I will be [there]', mirroring the theme of the antiphons. This is formed from the first letter of each title –

Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia.

As we take each of the Antiphons we are led into a consideration of the great Mystery of Christmas with an ever greater anticipation for what we receive in the birth of the Lord.



O Sapientia

O Wisdom ~ 17th December

Latin:

*O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti,
attingens a fine usque ad finem,
fortiter suaviterque disponens omni
veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

English:

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.

St John of the Cross has this wonderful sensibility of the Father only ever having spoken one word. It is a profound allusion – out of the eternal silence of God one Word is uttered, and that one Word contains everything God has ever wanted to communicate. And the one simple, single sound that is uttered out of the silence of God is “Jesus”.

*“The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.”*¹

It is something that Pope Benedict alluded to when he wrote some years ago:

*“we can compare the cosmos to a “book” – Galileo himself used this example – and consider it as “the work of an author who expresses himself through the ‘symphony’ of creation. In this symphony one finds, at a certain point, what would be called in musical terms a ‘solo’; a theme entrusted to a single instrument or voice which is so important that the meaning of the entire work depends on it. This ‘solo’ is Jesus. ... The Son of Man recapitulates in himself earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, flesh and Spirit. He is the centre of the cosmos and of history, for in him converge without confusion the author and his work”.*²

So much of what we experience in the world speaks of dis-order and dis-ease. We are confronted with

hate, with violence, with senseless brutality, with the ever-present alienation of the world. This simple, single sound of Jesus offers us something different. It is a clarity of sound, yes, even in the midst of such a cacophony of violence. It brings us back to a point of unity in a world of fragmentation. It is our hope for the order that He brings that acts as our own still point, our own anchor, our reference in the midst of all that threatens to tear us apart.

As we keep hoping in this way, we learn the way of truth. It is the way that helps us see through what is happening to something more, and to allow that ‘something more’ to guide our hearts and our actions. And it is this that helps us stretch beyond our instinctive reactions to things to act in a way different from the predictable. And as we keep doing this, then a new order begins to take form even in the midst of the chaos around us.

Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!

1. John of the Cross, Maxims on Love, 21 in The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), 675.

2. Benedict XVI, Verbum Domini: On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (30 September 2010).



O Adonai

O Lord ~ 18th December

Latin:

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

English:

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.

One of the prayers that I particularly like in the Rite of Baptism is the conferral of the lit candle to the parents and godparents of the child being baptised. Lighting a candle from the great Easter Candle, I say, “Receive the light of Christ. Your child has been enlightened by Christ. Keep alive the flame of faith alive in his heart so that when the Lord comes, he may go out to meet him with all the saints.”

In our baptism the light of Christ begins to shine in our hearts. It is but a flicker but through our life of discipleship we are to fan this flickering light into a flame, as St Paul’s Letter to Timothy states. Now, the flame of faith burns brightly within us so that we become a living candle giving light to the world.

The ancient writers particularly loved this image of becoming a living torch given the flame of faith alive and burning in our heart. They saw the story of Moses discovering a bush burning but not consumed as an analogy of our own hearts, aflame with the love of God. When we love God fully our hearts are full of desire, they glow with passionate longing, but they are not consumed or destroyed by such yearning. Rather than the yearning seeking its fulfilment it keeps expanding, keeps growing in intensity. We become a burning bush, afire but not burnt in the process.

The life of Christ comes to awaken within us this longing, this desire. It stokes the coals of our hearts. It stirs the ashes of our heart and breathes new life into the ashes and coals so that they glow again and such that they may burst into flame again. The life of Christ opens our countenance, it truly encourages us, in other words draws our heart into the open fully of question, full of searching, full of wonder.

Our hearts are enlightened, and they are enlivened. These are the great indications that God’s life draws near to us. We cannot remain in the dark, inert, and passive in the presence of the life of God. The life of God dawns over the landscape of our experience, and sparks fresh possibilities. And as our hearts are rendered more open, more receptive, more joyful, it is the One with outstretched arms whom we encounter, full of invitation, full of embrace.

Maranatha!

Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!



O Radix Jesse

O Root of Jesse ~ 19th December

Latin:

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

English:

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.

The antiphon refers to the passages in Isaiah that states: “See my servant shall prosper... So shall he startle many nations, because of him kings shall stand speechless... He grew up like a sapling, like a shoot.” (Isa 52:13, 15; 53:2). It refers to the tradition too that Jesus is in the line of King David, the youngest son of Jesse.

The antiphon thus celebrates the kingship of Jesus. It celebrates with longing that in Jesus, a new king comes into our midst.

However, this is a king not like any others. For the kingship of Jesus does not fore-arm. Rather it disarms. It does not conquer; it silences. This kingship brings about a whole new order which overturns every notion about power. In the ordinary sense, power is about who has control, who has the most influence, who has the most dominance. All this, however, is silenced in the face of the new exercise of authority located in Jesus.

Now, authority is recognised in receptivity, vulnerability, and fellowship. Authority is recognised in its capacity to touch, to heal, to forgive. Authority resides not in

alienation and competition, but in tenderness and the capacity to make peace. It has all the fragility, but all the promise of a new shoot, a sapling striking out of a ancient stump.

Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!



O Clavis David

O Key of David ~ 20th December

Latin:

*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.*

English:

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.

In these days we wait for the One who has the Key to come and unlock the room of our own experience in which we feel imprisoned, entrapped, inbound.

What is the experience like to have this room unlocked?

The key is a word of hope. And that word is Jesus. A word which changes the way in which we see our life, and which changes the way in which we do things. It is a word which opens for us new possibility even in the midst of what might be extraordinary limitation. This word of hope we have been given enables us to celebrate even in the face of frustration, distortion or limitation.

As Christians we are the people who live by this hope. We are the people to whom this hope has been entrusted. We are custodians of a hope, and we are called to celebrate that hope. That hope will enable us to act differently than the predicted concerns of the world dictate to us. And that hope leads us into a life of celebration. It is a celebration of the freedom we have now because of that hope, of the beauty that we can create now because of that hope, and of joy that we can share now because of that hope.

We are free to the extent that we hope. This Christmas, through the celebration of the good news of Jesus' birth into our world, may each of us receive the word of hope that is proclaimed to us as gift, that is given to us as a key, and may we celebrate the new freedom that is ours even now.

***Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!***



O Oriens

O Dayspring ~ 21st December

Latin:

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

English:

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

In this beautiful imagery of dawn, we recognise how we celebrate in the story of Jesus new beginnings. Many, many centuries ago, the Church father, Gregory of Nysaa wrote that the Christian life is a beginning, moving through beginnings, to a beginning. This possibility can never be taken away from us no matter the darkness of our night. Christmas reminds us of this again and again.

Indeed, every child is the sign of life's hope of ever new beginnings – and if this is so for a child generally, how much more true it is in the Divine Child.

We dare to proclaim that God has become a child. We celebrate that God has not only emptied himself of divinity to become one of us so as to share our humanity but that God has become a child.

Childhood therefore remains in God eternally.³ For God is an eternal beginning, an infinite possibility, an unquenchable awakening, pure presence. And if this be so, then, as we gaze upon the Divine Child at Bethlehem, we can let go of life's dead ends. We can see beyond the apparent blockages created by our failures and mistakes. We can glimpse beyond the stifling messages that we have received about ourselves. We can break open the tomb of our hurts and our bitterness. We can break open the numbness created by our

fear of imagination. We can breathe again, weep again, laugh again, love again. The child within us, ever open to the dawning fullness of life, can be born again and stretch out into the future once more.

The recovery of the 'child in us' is one of the delights of Christmas for us. It is the challenge for us even in our old age when we might "blow away the chaff of many things, so as to reveal the essential wheat of our time on earth," according to Daniel O'Leary.⁴ He goes on to observe, "Our souls are always young. They have preserved, in a safe place, the fields of dreams that once lay beautifully across the landscapes of our childhood. It is in these fields, and in no other, where the seeds of our God-like beauty were first nurtured, that our eternal harvest will be reaped. We do not outgrow our childhood. We grow into it more fully as we grow older. And it is only in heaven that we will possess it completely."⁵

Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!

3. Jurgen Moltman, *In the End – The Beginning*, 10.

4. Daniel O'Leary, "Home Before Dark," *The Tablet* (28 June 2008), 11.

5. O'Leary, "Home Before Dark," 11.



O Rex Gentium

O King of the Nations ~ 22nd December

Latin:

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

English:

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

It is always a marvel to consider how ancient extraordinary structures could be built without technology or with sheer human labour. In particular, the stone that held the great arches in place was of special fascination – the load stone. The one stone set in the right place held the two sides of the arch together. Take this stone away and the whole arch would collapse.

It is a wonderful image of the way on which Christ holds the two sides or our experience together. In the paradoxes and intersections of our life we are “stretched out amid the opposites in [our] life, between hanging on and letting go, between involvement and surrender, between deep engagement and gentle detachment. This is [our] crucifixion and [our] joy. It is [our] crucible in all its insecurity and beauty, fragility and possibility.”⁶ Henri Nouwen, the popular spiritual writer late last century, expressed the same spiritual implication of paradox in a poetically eloquent way when he wrote,

[There is] a time for mourning, a time for dancing (Ecclesiastes 3:4). But mourning and dancing are never fully separated. Their times do not necessarily follow each other. In fact, their times may become one time. Mourning may turn into dancing and dancing into mourning without showing a clear point where one ends and the other starts.

Often our grief allows us to choreograph our dance while our dance creates the space for our grief. We lose a beloved friend, and in the midst of our tears we discover an unknown joy. We celebrate a success, and in the midst of the party we feel deep sadness. Mourning and dancing, grief and laughter, sadness

*and gladness – they belong to each other as the sad-faced clown and the happy-faced clown, who make us both cry and laugh. Let's trust that the beauty of our lives becomes visible where mourning and dancing touch each other.*⁷

The entire Gospel message accepts and works in the belly of paradox. It looks for the place of blindness in order to bring vision; it seeks out the place of deafness to shout out a new message; it seeks out that place of paralysis to offer new movement. No where do we see this more starkly than in the reality of Jesus Christ himself, true God and true man. In Jesus himself we recognise the eternal paradox: God in humanity. But more than that: in the crucified Jesus we recognise the scandal of that divine paradox: Divinity is disclosed most fully and most powerfully in that place which is at first perceived as God-forsaken. The implication? If we want to find the God of Jesus Christ, we must go to that place of darkness awaiting light, we go to that place of emptiness awaiting fullness, we go to that place of death awaiting life.

But allowing things to be held together in this way requires patience. Simone Weil wrote, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” In commenting on this, Henri Nouwen reflected that without patience our expectation degenerates into mere wishful thinking. Patience comes from the word “patior” which means “to suffer”... what seems a hindrance becomes a way, what seems an obstacle becomes a door; what seems a misfit becomes a cornerstone.”⁸

Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!

6. Author and source unknown.

7. Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: a daybook of wisdom and faith*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), 28th March.

8. See *Advent and Christmas: Wisdom from Henri J. Nouwen* (Redemptorist Pastoral Publications, 2004), 4-5.



O Emmanuel

O With Us is God ~ 23rd December

Latin:

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

English:

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

Gift giving is a wonderful experience isn't it? Have you ever given a gift and held your breath while you waited for the other person's response? Or have you ever received a gift and not just been touched by it, but left without words because you know what it must have cost the person giving it, and not just financially?

The gifts that mean most to us come so completely unexpected or the ones that we have waited to appear for so long. Have you ever longed to receive something, wondering whether it would ever come, and then discovered it was yours? Do you recall the sense of unbelief and yet the sense of contentment?

At Christmas, God gives us a gift that is both long awaited and unexpected. The human heart longs eternally for the gift of knowing that there is always a new beginning possible, that there is an open horizon, that there is always a future for us – even in the face of death. It is the gift of hope that there is something more than what makes us less than what we could be.

The gift that God gives us in the midst of this longing that is deep in our hearts is a simple Word. Not much really in a word. What do you do with a word? But it is all God has. Out of his poverty God has given us everything God has. God has nothing left over, in a sense, after this gift. The word that God gives us is the only thing God knows, the only thing that God has.

The gift God gives us is God's own life and it is contained in a single word, "Jesus". For those who can accept this gift, who can receive this unexpected gift, it is a Word which means "I am with you"; "You are accepted"; you always have dignity"; you always have a future"; you always have a new beginning." The birth of Jesus is the birth of a new way of looking on life for us. That is the gift God gives each of us in our life if we can receive it.

Let us receive this gift with open and vulnerable hands and hearts. Let us long for it and recognise it in the most unexpected places. It comes to us in the cry of a baby born in a stable: there is nothing threatening here but gentle invitation and welcome.

That is the way of the most precious gifts to us.

Maranatha!
Come Lord Jesus, do not delay!



Concluding Reflection For

Christmas Eve

24th December

Icon:

*Holy Prophet Zechariah, Father of
John the Forerunner.*

And so we come to the morning before Christmas. There is a great sense of expectation and anticipation in the air as we attend to all the many things ahead of tomorrow.

The Church stops, however, on this morning of Christmas Eve in a moment of silence and wonder before the event that it is about to celebrate. And it does so through this most remarkable hymn of praise it places on the lips of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist.

It is the canticle by which the Church welcomes every new day. The day dawns, there is a new beginning. And in Christ something dawns, something begins. Through Zechariah we ponder on the marvel of this. We draw in our breath at the sheer mystery of God's unfolding plan, and the way that it has come to this point. As the sun rises, we wonder at the new beginning that is about to shine forth.

Zechariah recognises his son's part in this remarkable drama. And as we are drawn into the sheer poetry of his prayer, we recognised that this is not just a prayer of Zechariah for John the Baptist, his son. It is both our own prayer, and it is a prayer for us.

Zechariah affirms deep within his heart that the promise that God has made his people, he will keep. It is the promise of delivery. For the Israelites it was delivery from oppression. But for us the need for delivery is no less real. We stand before the mystery of Christ's coming conscious of all that holds us in its

grip – our memories, our mistakes, how anxieties our addictions, of all the things that rob us of our future, all the things that capture us in the past and the present, but which deny us of fresh possibility. Conscious of all that holds us, we stand before this new beginning with both hope and trust – trust that in end the freedom of spirit will indeed be given us. We pray Come Lord Jesus come because we hunger deep within ourselves for freedom, and we hunger for those around us that they too may be unfettered from what binds them so that they too may live in freedom and with possibility.

Zechariah is praying both for himself and for his son. But he is also praying for us who will follow in the example of John. We too are those who are to become signs of what God is doing in the midst of the world, agents of reconciliation, prophets of a new way of being, heralds of a different way of living, signs of salvation.

In the silence of our hearts this day let us praise God for what he has accomplished in Christ his Son, and for what he is accomplishing in us too who receive the life of his Son with open hearts.

