



Reflecting on the Hymns in Advent

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel #89

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

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel!

2 O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who orders all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go. [Refrain]

3 O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times once gave the law,
in cloud and majesty and awe. [Refrain]

4 O come, O Rod of Jesse's stem,
from every foe deliver them
that trust your mighty power to 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 the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery. [Refrain]

6 O come, O Dayspring from on high,
and cheer us by your drawing nigh;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadow put to flight. [Refrain]

7 O come, Desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of humankind;
O bid our sad divisions cease,
and be for us our Prince of Peace. [Refrain]

This hymn, originally in Latin, dates back over 1,200 years to monastic life in the 8th- or 9th-century. Seven days before Christmas Eve monasteries would sing the “O antiphons” in anticipation of Christmas Eve when the eighth antiphon, “O Virgo virginum” (“O Virgin of virgins”) would be sung before and after Mary’s canticle, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55).

The Latin metrical form of the hymn was composed as early as the 12th century. John Mason Neale (1818-1866), one of the founders of the Oxford movement, discovered the Latin hymn in the appendix of an early 18th-century manuscript. Neale, a translator of early Greek and Latin hymns, published it a collection of Mediaeval Hymns in 1851. The haunting melody, which for many epitomizes the spirit of Advent, probably originates from a 15th century processional hymn of French Franciscan nuns.

The text of the hymn echoes several prophetic themes. The title comes from Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel." Immanuel is Hebrew for "God with us."

The "Rod of Jes-se" refers to Isaiah 11:1: "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse." Jesse was the father of David, second king of Israel.

"Day-Spring" comes from Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, in Luke 1:78: "The day-spring from on high has visited us."

"Thou Key of David" is in Isaiah 22:22: "The key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder," which in turn refers to Isaiah 9:6: "The government shall be upon His shoulder."

Questions to Ponder

1. In Verse One the theme centres upon a deliverance from exile. In what ways are we living in exile in this present age and how does our faith in God and Christ bring hope and comfort in the midst of our feelings of loss and separation? What might our Advent prayer be for the coming of Christ at this time of exile in our lives?
2. Verse Two makes reference to "Wisdom from on high" and wisdom, both human and divine, has a prominent place in the Old Testament. We can think of the wisdom of Solomon as one of the foremost examples (1Kings 3). Divine wisdom is manifested in creation and in God's guidance of the nations and of individuals. What might our Advent prayer be for the coming of Christ in our own search for wisdom and guidance and also for the leaders of the nations in these challenging days?
3. Verse Seven refers to the "binding of the hearts of humankind" and longs for the day when "our sad divisions cease." How does this apply to our own lives, our country and to people everywhere. What might our Advent prayer be for the coming of the Prince of Peace to bring forgiveness, reconciliation and love?