

The Dayspring from on High

[Having celebrated Christ's birth here on Friday, this morning we make an imaginative step back in time to the 4th Sunday of Advent. But that's a step the Church takes every year when we enter this season].

During Advent I've been dipping into poet Malcolm Guite's *Waiting on the Word: A poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany* – this sermon derives from that. From 17th December he focuses on the seven ancient Advent prayers known as the 'O Antiphons', which go back at least to the 7th century and are the source for the hymn *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. The prayers call afresh on Christ to come, addressing him by mysterious titles originating in the Old Testament, some of which are picked up in Revelation: *O Wisdom, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Emmanuel!* One of these prayers was set to be sung before and after the Magnificat on each of the days leading up to Christmas Eve, beginning on 17th with *O Wisdom* [although the Sarum rite began a day earlier, hence the appearance of *O Sapientia* on 16th Dec in the calendar in the Book of Common Prayer]. Each antiphon begins with a long, drawn out 'O'; after addressing Christ by one of the titles, we ask him to come – to teach us, redeem us, enlighten us. As Guite observes, *the whole purpose of Advent is to be for a moment fully and consciously Before Christ (BC). In that place of darkness and waiting, we look for his coming and do not presume too much that we already know or have it.*

The original antiphons are in Latin and there is no definitive English translation. The one for today, 21st Dec, is *O Oriens* – literally *O rising*. It is sometimes translated as *O Morning Star*; Guite prefers the alternative *Dayspring*:-

*O Dayspring, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

Christ calls himself the *Morning Star* at the end of Revelation: that references back to Balaam's final oracle in the Book of Numbers, that *a star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel* – something witnessed by Matthew's Magi, who came in search of the king of the Jews having seen *his star at its rising*. *Sun of righteousness* (familiar to us from the hymns *Hark, the herald angels sing* and *Christ, whose glory fills the skies*) is from the prophet Malachi, where its rising causes those who revere God's name *to leap like calves released from the stall*. *Those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death* also feature in the preceding antiphon, when we call on the Key of David to release them from their prison – a reference to Isaiah 42. But the phrase appears in full in Luke's Gospel in the song of Zechariah (the Benedictus) – which is also Before Christ; and almost certainly based on a Jewish original. Through Zechariah, the Holy Spirit reveals that *The dayspring or dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death*. The birth of Jesus marks the dawn of a new era, especially for those in the darkness of oppression or depression, ignorance or mortality.

From the Latin *oriens* we get the word *Orient*, referring to the east: the location of the rising of the sun. Whether intentionally or coincidentally, this antiphon is set on 21st December, which is frequently the winter solstice – *the year's midnight*, according to John Donne – when the days stop shortening and start to lengthen: just knowing that raises the spirits of many. *Orient* is also a verb. Malcolm Guite powerfully reflects that our Christian lives are orientated, like our church buildings, from west to east. The font, traditionally at the west, is the place of our death to sin; *thereafter*, he writes, *we move eastwards, towards that rising and beginning, that eternal Sabbath, the first day of the week, our sunrise*. He quotes 2 Corinthians: *Even though our outward nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day*. Dylan Thomas bid his readers to *rage against the dying of the light*; but Christians move not towards a sunset, but that Dayspring which the birth and resurrection of Christ foreshow.

I find I respond strongly to the longing which is Advent, expressed in the antiphons by that long drawn out O. In the Jewish Scriptures we hear of the longings of God's people Before Christ – in today's psalm, for example, of a people derided by their enemies and feeling that God, rightly or wrongly, has rejected them: *Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts: show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved*. Those yearnings resonate with the longings of those who suffer in the world today; and those who identify with them: we long for an end to oppression and injustice and hunger and violence; and we yearn for the transformation which comes through Christ. Yes, imaginatively, we place ourselves BC, and join the call for him to come to be born among us. In the biddings of the antiphons, to lend us Wisdom; to unlock the prisons in which we find ourselves confined; to deliver and redeem and save us. But conscious that we and the world still fall far short of the glory of God, we also long, in the year of our Lord, for his second Advent: for his bring to fulfilment all that first dawned in the Dayspring of his birth.