

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH GRAFHAM

'THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK'

16th December 2020

O come, O come, Emmanuel!

The opening words of one of our much loved Advent carols. Each verse begins with the words 'O come' and a different image follows some of which may puzzle us more than others. For reasons that I hope will become clear, I'd like to suggest that, the carol begins in the wrong place and that the opening verse should be the final one.

The carol is based on what are known as the seven Advent antiphons - sometimes called the 'O' antiphons as that is how each one starts. An antiphon is a short phrase sung before a psalm or canticle. In this case, one of the seven is sung each day from 17th December before the Magnificat at Evening Prayer.

No one seems to know who wrote the Advent antiphons or when they were written. However they are referred to by Boethius, a Roman senator and philosopher, in the sixth century and it is probable that they date from many years earlier. They appear in an 8th century Anglo-Saxon poem known as the *Advent Lyrics* which is thought to come from Lindisfarne. In a recent talk, the priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, who has written his own series of sonnets based on the antiphons, suggested that author composed the antiphons from the perspective of someone writing before the coming of Christ. He suggested that this anonymous writer said to himself, 'If I didn't know Jesus' name, what would I be asking for and what would I call him?' He then pored over the Old Testament to come up with his answers.

Hence each antiphon begins with a title of the Messiah: Sapientens - wisdom; Adonai - ruler or Lord; Radix - root (of Jesse); Clavis - key (of David); Oriens - morning star or dayspring; Rex - King (of the nations); Emmanuel. Each one ties in to the prophecies of Isaiah. Perhaps you recognise them (chapters 9 and 11 are good starting points.) All the antiphons end with a plea to God to come and save his people.

Perhaps from tomorrow you might like to reflect on one of these titles each day. I'm only going to offer you a few words about each as a possible starting point.

Wisdom. Is it the same as knowledge? Is it an attribute we can acquire? Or in this context are we thinking about something very different and much greater? Wisdom here is from God and of God. Perhaps Wisdom is part of what St John means by the Word - Christ, for whose coming we wait in Advent. What might Wisdom mean for you and how might you experience it?

Adonai, meaning Lord, is one of the ancient ways of referring to God. Remember Thomas' words when Jesus appears to him after the Resurrection - 'My Lord and my God'. What might they



Manuscript showing the first 3 antiphons

mean for you?

Root What does it mean to be rooted? In times of uncertainty being rooted is especially important. Possibly we might think of being rooted in the Scriptures, of the continuity between what today we call the Old and New Testaments. You might recall our shared Christian history and your own faith journey. What does it mean to be rooted in God's love?

Key Keys both close and open. Where might you need closure, what might we need to leave behind? Where and how might you want to ask God to make you more open - to him and to other people?

Morning Star Our churches traditionally face east looking towards the light which rises there. Light speaks of warmth and life, of hope and of joy. So many of the images of Advent speak of light coming in the darkness - where might our world need that light today or where might you?

King How does our worldly understanding of kings and other leaders, of kingship and power, differ from the kingship of Christ? What does the Kingdom of Heaven mean to you?

Emmanuel It means 'God with us'. This is the climax and culmination of the antiphons. This is the moment of recognition and acknowledgment for the writer. This coming of God among us is what we celebrate at Christmas. What might it mean to welcome him afresh this year?

More than enough to think about for the next seven days!

With my love and prayers

Camilla

Please share these mailings with anyone who you think might find them helpful. If they would like to receive them direct they are welcome to email office@standrewsgrafham.org.uk and we will add them to the mailing list.