



Sunday 8th December 2024
 Choral Evensong Advent 2
 The Rev'd Canon Jenny Wilson

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying, ... Amen.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,

so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² *as when fire kindles brushwood*

and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,

so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

This is the Advent cry. The cry of the prophets.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...

Last Sunday, Advent Sunday in our glorious Carol service we heard woven through the liturgy the Advent cry “O”. This is a cry of longing, of longing for God to come. The cry comes from places of great distress, from hearts that are broken, from human beings in families and communities and nations, in places where the truth and love and comfort of God seems absent for there is such pain. We might wonder if the cry comes not only from humanity but from our planet, from creation itself.

In our Advent Carol service, after we began by processing, singing the hymn, “O come, O come Emmanuel,” we heard chanted the “O” Antiphons. We will spend a little time pondering these for they seem a very good reflection on the needs of humanity, needs that only God can respond to, needs woven into the life of each one of us created by God.

The first O Antiphon is a cry to Wisdom. “O Wisdom, which hast come out of the mouth of the Most High ... Come and teach us the ways of wisdom.” The

first Advent cry exhorts God to give us wisdom, to nurture us in the ways of the reflective life, of life knowing we are held and created in God, of life knowing our human frailties and the limitations of living in the midst of creation.

The second O Antiphon is a cry “O Adonai, Deliverer of the house of Israel, who at Sinai did’st give the law to Moses, come and deliver us with outstretched arm.” This cry makes reference to the Lord who gave us the law. This cry reminds us that God who invites us into covenant life, guides us with the law, and particularly the commandments that give us guidelines in living well with God and with our fellow human beings.

The next two O Antiphons speak of God leading us out, delivering us. “O Root of Jesse, standing as a banner for the people ... come and deliver us and tarry not.” We can imagine that banner for the people, that Godly presence leading us in the way of God, and the longing that God does not “tarry”. The sense that we are lost and needing guidance in the way of God.

And then for those imprisoned, “O Key of David, that openest and no man shutteth, that shuttest and no man openeth: Come and bring the prisoner out of the prison house.” For those imprisoned literally through their own fault or, for those held hostage, for those held through unjust accusations. Or for those for whom a “prison” is more of a metaphor. For those imprisoned through unjust structure, through false views of themselves, through the hold of memory, of trauma.

And then for those who sitteth in darkness and the shadow of death “O Day Spring, Brightness of Light Everlasting and Sun of Righteousness come and lighten us.” Sun here is spelt S-u-n. Images of bright light coming down to free those in darkness.

The sixth O antiphon speaks of forgiveness. “O King of the Nations and their desire; the Corner Stone who makest reconciliation. Come and save mankind

who though hast formed of clay”. We are made of clay and are frail and finite and we sin. This antiphon of longing speaks of the desire for reconciliation.

And finally, the word Emmanuel. “O come O come Emmanuel” the opening hymn of our advent Carol service rang. The final O Antiphon gathers in this theme. “O Emmanuel ... the desire of the nations. Come and save us, O Lord our God.” The great longing is that God is with us. Emmanuel. With us, to teach us wisdom and to give us the law to guide our relationships with God and one another. With us, to be a banner a guide to lead us in the way of life and peace. With us, to free us from all sorts of ways of imprisonment. With us, as light to free us from darkness and the shadow of death. With us, to offer one of the greatest gifts of all – forgiveness, reconciliation, healing of our relationship with God. Emmanuel God with us to save us.

As we await the coming of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, we might allow the words of the prophet to ring “O that you would break open the heavens and come down.” And we might allow those words to be our prayer as we pray for the world. And we might imagine where those words are uttered as a cry in our time and place. What place is on our hearts? We cannot care about every place and person who is suffering. God will place on our hearts one or two places, one or two situations and invite us to hold those places or people or situations in our prayers. To keep God company, really, as God longs to bring healing and peace to the world.

I remember one scholar suggesting that to pray for a situation it helps to remember perhaps one person or one family that we might have read about or heard speak in a television interview. And to pray for that person. This Advent night, to imagine perhaps that person or family crying out, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” “O Emmanuel ... the desire of the nations. Come and save us, O Lord our God.”

I saw on the television a few weeks ago a report of a school in a city in Ukraine. The children in that school met in rooms that were underground because it was safer there. That was what these children knew. School underground. And at the end of the school day, the children and their teachers, carefully, nervously, made their way above the ground and caught a bus to take the children to their homes. And we watched the bus we saw one child crying in the arms of her teacher, for they all knew that the bus trip was not safe.

So, I might imagine this child, this group of children and teachers and families, living in the midst of war and I might hear Isaiah crying on their behalf, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” “O come, O come Emmanuel.”

And each one of us might imagine in a similar way Isaiah carrying the cry for the situations that God has placed on our hearts, be it those we love dearly, be it places of war, be it those caught up in natural disasters, be it the planet itself. And we might know that God hears us, that Emmanuel, the Christ Child will come.