

O Come, Emmanuel
Luke 21:25-36
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If you look at the bottom of the page of your hymnal that contains the hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” you will see its words credited to a certain John Mason Neale, a British hymnographer who is also known for bringing us “Good King Wenceslas” and “Good Christian Men Rejoice,” among more than 400 other lesser known hymns. Like many artists, he did not receive much critical acclaim for his efforts during his lifetime, but, as it has been written about him, “In time... the oversight of his own Church would be corrected. Archbishop Trench called him ‘the most profoundly learned hymnologist of our church’; another wrote ‘one of the most erudite scholars, one of the best linguists, one of the most profound theologians, and the foremost liturgist of his time.’ Neale could read, write and think in 21 languages and was especially conversant in Latin and Greek.”

It was from his great knowledge of Latin that in 1851 he translated “Veni, Veni Emmanuel,” the seventh stanza of the Advent Antiphons, into what is now one of the most beloved of Advent hymns in the English language church. While I am neither conversant in Latin, nor even sure of my pronunciation, here are the words of that seventh stanza in their original language, because they should not be missed in their natural state:

Veni, Veni Emmanuel!
Captivum solve Israel!
Qui gemit in exilio,
Privatus Dei Filio.
Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel
Nascetur pro te, Israel.

There it is. I always wanted to speak Latin in church. Veni, Veni, Emmanuel, the call to our Savior to return.

According to some sources, the Advent Antiphons, or the O Antiphons as they are sometimes called, are among the oldest existing Christian prayers. They were traditionally recited as a part of the evening Vespers prayers of the Roman Catholic Church before and after the recitation of The Magnificat in the eight days before Christmas Eve. Each of the seven stanzas addressed the Messiah by one of his titles, each one praising the coming of the Savior by a different name, hence, O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Star of the East (or O Dayspring), O King of the Nations, and, of course, O Emmanuel, God with Us, whose Scriptural basis comes to us from the prophet Isaiah, in the seventh chapter, “The Lord himself will give you this sign: the Virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” And you also see why they are called the O Antiphons. Incidentally, or perhaps not so incidentally, in Latin, the first letters of the titles make an acrostic which, when read backwards, spell *Ero Cras*, which means: “Tomorrow I will be there,” to the medieval mind clearly a reference to the approaching Christmas vigil. Such was the power of these ancient words that

John Mason Neale translated them, rearranged their order, and set them to music arranged by his favorite collaborator, Thomas Hellmore, and we are still singing them today, although, if you read all the way to the bottom of the hymn's credits, you will see that although Neale did a perfectly wonderful job, others have tried to improve the hymn even more, and hence the final two verses were perfected in 1916 by the great twentieth century preacher, Henry Sloane Coffin. One final, more trivial note about the O Antiphons, which may appeal to any fantasy fiction buffs in the room, is that they served as the basis for a very old Anglo Saxon poem by Cynewolf, a work which so enamored JRR Tolkien that he added the names of some of the characters in that poem to his book, "The Hobbit." So, more than you ever wanted to know about any one hymn. Now, what does it all mean?

I think what it all means is that we human beings, and especially we Christians, have recognized our limitations, have seen our best efforts fail to bear fruit, and in the end, all we can do, in every age, and in every generation, is cry out for Christ's return. We are desperate for the release promised by God through Jesus Christ, we are desperate for God's grace, we are desperate for God's presence. Come, O God, please come, be with us! We cannot do it without you! We have tried, and made a mess of it. We are like Humpty Dumpty who has fallen off the great wall, and neither all the king's horses, nor all the king's men, can put us back together again. Only you, O Christ, can redeem this broken world, and our broken lives. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

On this First Sunday of Advent, our Scripture passages remind us that the presence of God we seek is not only the presence of the babe in a manger, but the presence of the God who can put the world back together, and who has promised to do so, in God's good time. From Jeremiah's words reminding God's people of God's promise to restore their fallen fortunes: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness"; from those words to Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints;" in every age of God's people, we yearn for that day of return when God's reign reverses all our wayward fortunes, fixes all our mistakes, and obliterates all our sin from the world, once and for all. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Those promises of return may be of little comfort, however, when they always seems to be *Ero Cras*: "Tomorrow I will be there." It's always tomorrow with you, isn't it, God? What about today? What about my needs today? What

about the starving children, the maimed soldiers, the beaten prostitutes, the suicidal alcoholics? Why do they have to wait for tomorrow? What good are your promises for them, for me, if they come too late for my suffering? This is the imperative to us of the Gospel, that we bring Christ's presence into the world today, even as we wait for *Ero Cras*. This is the dual message we celebrate during Advent as we remember both the once and future coming of Christ into our world. For as it was in the first coming that we catch a glimpse of the second coming, it those who suffer that catch a glimpse of the future Christ in Christ's presence here on earth today, in we the church. You see, when God's people cry out, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," they are crying out for God, yes, but they are also crying out for us, for our incomplete and inept presence, but perhaps also their only visible sign of God's presence in the world.

Let me return to John Mason Neale's time to offer an example of the power of that presence. Neale arrived to study at Cambridge University during the final years of the life a certain Charles Simeon, rector of Trinity Chapel at Cambridge, the University's church. It is quite possible we would never have had "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," were it not for the efforts of Charles Simeon to bring the presence of God into the midst of the Cambridge campus. When Simeon was appointed to Trinity Church, it is said that "the Gospel had not been preached there for more than forty years," and true or not, at the very least we can say that the movement of the Spirit was at low ebb at Cambridge. To say that Simeon was not

well received at Cambridge is an understatement. His more evangelical style, in contrast to the rationalistic mindset of the university in those days, brought him into conflict with virtually everyone. Longtime members of the church even took to locking their pews during his sermons, so that those who wished to listen would have to stand in the aisles. Frequently during his sermons in the early years, parishioners would even throw bricks through the windows of the church to disrupt him. But he persevered, and increasingly, the church began to fill up with students, and by the end of his life, Simeon had profoundly and personally influenced a generation of young Anglican priests, began a missionary society that would send hundreds of young people off to missionary service, and founded the predecessor campus ministry organization to what is now called the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, in which some of you while in college may have participated. All of this had been accomplished by the time John Mason Neale arrived on campus into an environment that would nurture his spirit rather than crush it, and pave the way for the words we sing tonight, and throughout this Advent.

I want to encourage you this Advent to eagerly await the coming of Christ, on Christmas Day a few weeks from now, and on that unknown day in the future, but also to be that presence of God that so many need. Remember that you are “the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ,” and that the presence they bring is as needed now as much as it ever has been. May God bless us this Advent as we both cry out, and answer, those ancient words, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Amen.