

The 'O' Antiphons, Heraldng the Advent of the Messiah

Fr. Simon writes: Today is the 13th anniversary of my ordination as a Deacon and while priests might more naturally celebrate their anniversary of their priesthood, the anniversary of diaconate is very significant, as it is the day when we said 'yes' to the mission to which the Lord has called us.

The rite of ordination is worth some consideration: The transitional deacon freely accepts '*celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom*'. It is to the world a counter-cultural sign, but it is important, as it shows us the type of relationships that we will have in heaven. Indeed, we are handed the book of the Gospels as the bishop says: '*receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach*'.

Saint John the Baptist, the patron saint of Advent, was a herald for Christ. It is not the camel skin or the eating of locust that makes John seem weird. No, with international travel throughout the world, we have all seen strange dress and eaten bizarre foods; in fact, you only need to go to a cosmopolitan city in this country to see eccentric individuals!

What makes Saint John the Baptist weird in this age, is his call for conversion and repentance. Today's world would tell him, '*to get with the programme*'. They would want him to affirm their life choices, to preach a '*gospel of nice*', rather than the '*Gospel of Christ*'. And yet, both the gospel of Matthew and Mark record similar words of Jesus Christ as he begins his pastoral ministry: '*Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand*'. Well thank goodness there are opportunities throughout Advent for Confession!

I am sure that many a priest this advent has reminded us that this season is one which allows us to return to the horizon of hope, a hope that does not disappoint because it is founded on the Word of God, and this hope has been the anchor of this past '*Jubilee Year*'.

The *'theological virtue of hope'* does not disappoint because the Lord Himself never disappoints! He is always faithful! We, sadly, are the ones who so often disappoint, and St John the Baptist shows us the reality of salvation: we must *'prepare a way for the Lord and make his paths straight'*. We must eliminate anything and everything that *'dominates'* us and let instead, the Dominus (the Lord) to completely encompass our lives.

There is always a danger that the Gospel has become a fairy tale or has become like the introduction to Star Wars, *'a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'*; a grand story with a lovely moral message. But, no! the Gospel remains *'the words of eternal life'* and our assurance that God has made a definitive intervention into human history – *'the people who walked in darkness have seen the great light'* of Christ!

Unlike Star Wars which speaks of *'the divine'* as some impersonal *'force'*, we see in Jesus Christ, the most radical of persons – radical because he invites us into a personal relationship! Up until this point in human history, *'the gods'* are those who are to be placated and feared, and yet God is willing to go to hell and back to show us the depth of his love for us.

Advent is a powerful Liturgical season - providing we have let it happen and have not been celebrating Christmas since the end of November - inviting us to pause in silence to understand God's presence drawing near. In today's Mass homily, I said we are awaiting the *'the Return of the King'*, but who is this King and why should we be bothered by his return?

From 17th December, the Church sings the *'O Antiphons'* at Vespers (while in the Mass, they become the gospel acclamation). They show us who the redeemer-Messiah is and why he is important; and like the people who first expected the coming of the Messiah, he does not meet our earthly expectations – no he transcends them:

O Sapientia: O wisdom: He is the Word of God who governs all creation. *‘Through him all things were made’* and are sustained by his grace; for only He is the way to salvation. Isaiah showed us that the spirit of the Lord will rest on him. And he will have *‘a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord’* (Isaiah 11:2-3). These same attributes he shares with us in the Sacrament of Confirmation, and how could we possibly imagine journeying through this passing world without these divine helps!?

O Adonai: O Sacred Lord! He is *‘the one who is, and who was and who is to come’*; the same Lord of Israel who showed himself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave the holy law on Mount Sinai, who stretched out his hands on the cross to endure his passion; and now continues *‘to open for his people the way from death into life’*. Our prayer in this season is wonderfully expressed in the Advent Penitential rite: *‘Lord, Jesus...*

you came to gather the nations into the peace of God’s Kingdom;
you come to us in Word and Sacrament to strengthen us and make us holy;
and you will come again in glory with salvation for your people’.

O Radix Jesse: O Flower of Jesse’s stem. This is He who is the *‘vine’* onto which we have been grafted in Holy Baptism; in him we continue to flourish and have new life. In a secular world that turns its back on God, we find God has a tender care for the remnant that have remained faithful to their baptismal calling. It is also a sign of hope; even if all around us seems to have died spirituality, in the mission of the Church, we can still see that *‘a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. (Is. 11:1)’.*

O Clavis David: O Key of David: this is the dignity of a Christian, that they are part of a royal and noble house. We have been *‘found worthy to be in God’s presence and minister to him’*; we feel comfortable to be in the Royal Palace,

because through the sanctifying grace in our soul we have '*royal blood*' and are blessed to see heaven as our true home.

O Oriens: O Dawn of the East. We look to the East, because it is an image of the rising Sun / Son. That is why when we celebrate Holy Mass, our orientation is important. As we will hear during the Mass of Midnight: *the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shown. (Isaiah 9:1)*. Our attention should always be towards God so that we may give thanks to him and receive from him the graces we need on our pilgrimage.

O Rex Gentium: O King of all the nations: But he is also the King of the Universe. Again, as we will hear in the Mass of Midnight, we hear what qualities this king has: *'For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counsellor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:5)*

O Emmanuel: O God with us; this is so important. He is not distant from us, but is one who comes to us, to save us and set us free. This Advent, we ask to know Christ more deeply, to be drawn a little deeper into the Sacred Mysteries of our faith so that we may become the evidence that the world so desperately needs to believe in God.

And from 4th Sunday of Advent, we wait patiently with Our Lady:

Alma Redemptoris Mater: O Loving Mother of our Redeemer, gate of heaven and star of the sea. Hasten to aid thy fallen people who strive to rise once more. Thou who brought forth thy Holy Creator, all creation wondering, yet remainest ever Virgin, taking from Gabriel's lips that joyful 'Hail', be merciful to us sinners.