

...to hear the angels sing

Four meditations for Advent



Trinity Carol Roll (Trinity MS O.3.58)

The music we sing and hear at Advent and Christmas is one of the glories of our tradition. Yet so much of it flies by, and we don't have time to properly consider its meaning and its beauty. These four sessions for St James' Pilgrim Groups are designed around music that will be sung at our service of Lessons and Carols on **22nd December 2024**.

The sessions loosely map the traditional four weeks of Advent, tracing the history of waiting for the Messiah, from the beginning of God's promises to Abraham and Moses through to the faithfulness of Mary. You may not be able to squeeze in all four sessions before Christmas: don't worry! You could always save one or two for the Epiphany season (January), or just do the ones that appeal.

For each session, we suggest you begin as you normally would in your Pilgrim Group, eg. catching up on what is going on for each other; spending time in prayer together. The reflection on a hymn or carol could then form the middle of the session. You could leave time at the end to listen to a recording of the carol, and make that listening a time for prayer. Feel free, though, to adapt the material to suit the pattern of your group.

Week I: Patriarchs

1. O come, O come, **Emmanuel!**

Redeem thy captive Israel,

That into exile drear is gone

Far from the face of God's dear Son.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Isaiah 7:14

2. O come, **thou Wisdom** from on high!

Who madest all in earth and sky,

Creating man from dust and clay:

To us reveal salvation's way. *Refrain*

I Corinthians 1:24

Genesis 1

Genesis 2.7

3. O come, O come, **Adonai,**

who in thy glorious majesty

From **Sinai's mountain**, clothed with awe,

Gavest thy folk the ancient law. *Refrain*

(Lord) I Corinthians 12:3

Exodus 20

4. O come, thou **Root of Jesse!** Draw

The quarry from **the lion's claw;**

From those dread caverns of the grave,

From nether hell, thy people save. *Refrain*

Isaiah 11.1

Ezekiel 19:5-9

6. O come, O come, thou **dayspring bright!**

Pour on our souls thy healing light;

Dispel the long night's lingering gloom,

And pierce the shadows of the tomb. *Refrain*

Luke 1:78 (KJV)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcllZpnZPgo>

Some context

This is one of the great advent hymns: its roots go back at least 1200 years, to the medieval monastic tradition. The first line of each verse references the ancient plainchant 'O antiphons', chants sung by monks in the days before Christmas, addressing Christ by different titles: *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom); *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse) etc. These ancient chants were extended to form a longer hymn in Latin, certainly by 1710 and probably much earlier. This was then translated into English by J. M. Neal and also T. R. A Lacey, in the 19th Century.

Things to notice

Notice the mention of 'exile' (v.1). This is partly about Israel's periods of exile, in Egypt and Babylon. What other kinds of exile might it make us think of?

Notice how many verses draw on what God has done in the past (eg. v.3 giving Israel the law), hoping that God will continue to act like this today.

Notice the connection of darkness with death in v.5-6, and Christ with light.

The hymn references the long tradition of thinking of Christ as 'Wisdom' (v.2). You could look at Proverbs 8 for one of the Wisdom texts that Christians have read as being about Christ.

Prompts for reflection

Which lines and images speak to you, and why?

Are there images you find less helpful, or troubling? Or lines that are still confusing?

The hymn is a plea: it asks again and again, Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22.20) Might we identify with that sense - longing for things to be different?

Week 2: Prophets

1. It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men
From heaven's all-gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

Luke 2.14

2. Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its Babel-sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Genesis 11

3. Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

4. For lo! the days are hastening on
By prophet-bards foretold,
When with the ever circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

eg. Isaiah 11.1

eg. Isaiah 6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAq29n4BGoA>

Some context

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" is an 1849 poem and written by Edmund Sears, pastor of the Unitarian Church in Massachusetts. We sing it to a traditional English tune, adapted by Arthur Sullivan.

The focus is not on the details of the nativity story, but on its relevance for us, today ('Still through the cloven skies...'). It is thought Sears was responding to the American-Mexican war in his own day, and praying for peace. It has been called 'a meditation on man's wilful deafness to the message of the angels'.

Things to notice

The biblical basis for the carol is the song of the angels in Luke 2:14. Which ingredients has Sears used from that passage?

Notice 'Babel-sounds'. The allusion here is to the tower of Babel, Genesis 11. What might that reference mean here?

In advent we think of all the prophecy and expectation that foretold the birth of Jesus. This is referenced here in 'prophet bards foretold'.

Prompts for reflection

There is a sense of weariness ('weary world'; 'two thousand years of wrong'). Can you identify with that? What today gives you that same sense of weariness?

Sears imagines the angel's message as 'a love song'. How do you feel about imagining God's message in this way?

'Hush the noise'. Where might you find space this Advent and Christmas to listen for the angel's song of peace?

Week 3: Mary

There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose that bare Jesu;
Alleluia.

For in this rose contained was
Heaven and earth in little space;
Res miranda. [Wonderful thing]

John 1.10

By that rose we may well see
That He is God in persons three,
Pari forma. [Of equal form]

The angels sungen the shepherds to:
Gloria in excelsis Deo:
Gaudeamus. [Let us rejoice]

Luke 2.14

Now leave we all this worldly mirth
And follow we this joyful birth;
Transeamus. [Let us go there]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Efj4g8i5Osk>

Some context

This is a medieval carol, from The Trinity Carol Roll, a 15th-century manuscript of thirteen English carols held by the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge. This document is the earliest surviving example of polyphonic (multi-part) music written in English. The majority of texts are in Middle English in a Norfolk dialect, with some of the carols - such as this one - alternating between Latin and Middle English, a common form for carols of the period, known as 'macaronic' verse. (Fun fact - the 'macaroni' in Yankee Doodle Dandy is not pasta! - it refers

instead to the fashion for 18th-century tourists to combine elements of Italian and English fashion, just as this carol combines Latin and English verse!).

Devotion to Mary was becoming popular in 14th and 15th century, and there was a lot of it about in Norfolk, where the carol probably originated.

Things to notice

The image of Mary as a 'rose' shapes verses 1-3. In the fifth century, a Christian poet called Coelius Sedulius first referred to Mary as a "rose among thorns", to describe the way that the perfection of Mary and Jesus sprang from the sin of Eve and Adam. The image stuck, and led to lots of medieval poetry and metaphor: Mary as 'mystic rose', 'rose without thorn', 'spotless rose'.

'He is God in persons three': notice how the three parts of the music weave in and out of each other.

Prompts for reflection

'In this rose contained was/ Heaven and earth in little space'. The idea here is that the divine creator of heaven and earth is present with us in the child Jesus, contained in Mary's womb. What does this imagery of pregnancy and motherhood mean for you?

'*Res miranda* (wonderful thing)'. How often does your faith take the shape of simply *wondering*?

'Leave we all this worldly mirth'. There is lots of mirth at Christmas time... might we sometimes need to step away from all that?

Week 4: Jesus

Little Lamb who made thee

Dost thou know who made thee?

Gave thee life & bid thee feed.

By the stream & o'er the mead;

Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing wooly bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,

Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,

Little Lamb I'll tell thee!

He is called by thy name,

For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild,

He became a little child:

I a child & thou a lamb,

We are called by his name.

Little Lamb God bless thee.

Little Lamb God bless thee.

John 1.29

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIMUquOdDT4>

Some context

The composer John Tavener set to music the poem "The Lamb", from William Blake's collection of poems Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789).

Tavener converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 1970s. Lots of his music is influenced by that tradition, with drones (long, low notes beneath other parts), plainchant-like shapes, and an air of simplicity and mystery.

Things to notice

Tavener's harmonies are often 'chromatic' - clashing, spooky-sounding, dissonant. 'He became a little child' - notice how the dissonant lines of the music come back together here; why?

The speaker in the poem is a child, addressing a lamb. '*I a child & thou a lamb, We are called by his name.*' Notice how child, lamb, and God become linked together.

The image of Jesus as 'Lamb of God' is widespread. It is there in John 1.29; it might echo the image of sacrifice in Isaiah 53; it becomes a major symbol in the Book of Revelation.

Jesus is described as 'meek and mild'. Is this a helpful epithet?

'We are called by his name': God is reaching out to us by the Incarnation. Compare John 1.12.

Prompts for reflection

The first half of the poem is a question - to the lamb, to the whole of creation, and to us: 'dost thou know who made thee?'. What difference would it make, to know that we are made by God?

'He became a little child'. Jesus' helplessness among us as a child is unsettling. What might it mean for you, this year?

Listen to the carol. Perhaps its strange music contains something of the mystery, the unease, and the challenge of Christmas, that is easily lost amidst the tinsel. How does it make you feel?