

Advent II 2016
St Michael's, Cornhill

O Oriens

*O Dayspring, Brightness of Light everlasting, and Sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten him that sitteth in darkness, and in the shadow of death.*

I have much to be eucharistic about this morning, many thanksgivings to make. Your preacher – who has travelled from a parish that many of you will likely think so far beyond the boundary of true London as to make him positively a country parson - preached his very first sermon in this very pulpit. St Michael's Cornhill was for me in the days of my priestly training both sanctuary and nursery: sanctuary in that it gave shelter from an often unhappy experience of Seminary, and nursery because I learnt a great deal here, and was loved. That learning (but most of all that loving) was your great gift to me. For both sanctuary and nursery, then, I thank God for St Michael's.

But I know you will indulge such recollections coming as they do from a priest whose parish is far to the west of here, because you will know that west in the Christian compass is the orientation of remembrance; west is the direction of yesterday, of what has been. Advent, on the other hand, summons us to look up, look on, look east, to raise our sights to the far horizon, to tomorrow: 'Look toward the east, O Jerusalem, and behold the joy that comes to you from God', saith the prophet Baruch. Isaiah's prophetic voice echoes the same message of God's future work: 'And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, a branch shall grow out of his roots'. East in our

Christian compass is the orientation of God's deliverance, his action and his redemption, of what is to be, of what God is yet to bring to pass by his zeal and mighty power.

And this is what Advent is about – looking up, looking on, looking east - it is what gives this short quartet of weeks its urgent, pressing character as we look ahead in hope to the peaceable coming of the Christ-child who visited us in great humility, and anticipate too times of reckoning, when the Lord will come to his vineyard and hold his stewards to account.

It is for this good reason that our churches traditionally are fixed on this eastwardly axis of hope. That the High Altar of Christian remembrance is placed at the east end of the church is deeply significant, for the holy rites performed there themselves are charged as much with anticipation as they are with remembrance – the Mass is a proclamation of what shall be as well as a making present of what once was done. East is the direction we face when together we confess our belief in 'the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come'.

And so you see that the eastwardly orientation of our churches is not incidental; indeed, it bears deep weight, which is why the lives of those who inhabit hallowed ground ought also to be oriented likewise. In Christ we are to live and move in an eastwardly direction; that is, possessed of the spiritual urgency that is proper to Advent; to our faith in the one who 'shall come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose

kingdom shall have no end'. 'People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year'!

This spiritual urgency intensifies during Advent through the distinctive hymnody of the season and its liturgical texts, not least the heralding voices of the great O Antiphons.

Each week your visiting preacher will no doubt instruct you in every detail of their respective Os – though I fear this may prove for you something of a liturgical O-verdose... The Evening Office in both the English & the Roman Churches frames the Magnificat, the Virgin's sweet song, with an antiphon (a short devotional sentence). This antiphon is either said or sung. From the 17th-23rd December (or in the old English tradition of Sarum from 16th-23rd December) those antiphons all begin with the vocative 'O' – which in itself adds greater urgency to its meaning - and each antiphon is a messianic title for Christ. Happily, in recent years the O Antiphons have been restored to use in Public Worship. But fear not, you don't need to be a liturgical scholar to be familiar with these rich and ancient texts; if you love the hymn *O come, O come Emmanuel* then you will already know them.

The fifth of the seven O Antiphons is properly called in Latin, *O Oriens* – 'O Rising Sun', but is more poetically translated as 'O Morning Star' or 'O Dayspring'. And when set to its proper plainsong *O Oriens* sounds like this....(*Antiphon sung by cantor.*)

O Oriens is, of course, a text flooded with light. And just as white light when it passes through a prism is revealed to be made up of different wavelengths (a single shaft of white light possess within it a rainbow of colours), so too the light which floods this Antiphon. Time this morning, though, only allows us to reflect on three strands in the spectrum of O Oriens.

This first is, LIGHT AS GLORY. Christ's light is foremost the light of his glory; the light that dwells within him and emanates from him because he is the Light of Light, his the brilliance of the Divine Nature. This is the light that John the Baptist – whose wild and woolly presence is close at hand in today's Gospel – was sent to witness to, and prepare the way for. 'John was not that light', the Fourth Gospel tells us, 'but was sent to bear witness to that light, that was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. O Oriens awakens us to see that before our eyes (though veiled in our flesh) is the fullness of the Godhead's glory. He who gives himself to us in the frail form of a fleshly child is the God who dwells in light inaccessible.

LIGHT AS QUICKENING

And as O Oriens shines with the light of Christ's eternal glory and his divine identity, so it also refers us to the quickening, healing his light brings. The messianic title 'Sun of Righteousness' (that 'Sun' not 'Son') is Malachi's. Malachi is the final prophetic voice of the Old Testament, and his short book abounds with references to the God who comes suddenly and decisively to purify and to save: 'But for you who fear my name

the Sun of Righteousness shall arise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall'. What enlivening grace Christ's coming to us brings! What healing love he shares! This, then, is light as it purifies and enliven. Just as in the natural world where light is possessed of a natural disinfecting power, so too the light O Oriens brings and sheds is one which heals man's spiritual sore: estrangement becomes communion, selfishness redeemed by sacrifice, enmity turned to amity, violence transformed into peace.

LIGHT AS ILLUMINATION

And there is the light as illumination: *Come and enlighten him that sitteth in darkness, and in the shadow of death.* At his coming, O Oriens brings into the dark ignorance and unbelief of our race the light that illumines, that reveals to us what is true and beautiful and good. The gloom of ignorance is dispelled by the truth he brings and the truth he is. And even death's black shadow is shattered by it, for this light of illumination is not the light of knowledge, but of love. God in Christ enlightens us not by the gift of knowledge (as if we were saved by knowing more) but by the action of love. And God's redemption of the world is his work of love, not ours; the salvation we long for (for ourselves and this world) is his gift, not our possession (nor is it anything we can ever work to earn or win). To know that and to love the one who reveals it to us is true enlightenment.

Light as Glory, light as quickening, light as illumination. But the world into whose darkness this light came, does not receive him. Many are wilfully blind to the goodness and glory of him. And

that blindness skews our perspective and both distorts and diminishes our vision. The closer we get to Christmas the clearer this distortion becomes: around us we see how Advent has become a season of excess when women and men get more than they want and desire more than they need – it's what dieticians call 'portion distortion'. So let our keeping of Advent be a light in this blind darkness, for the closer we get to the feast of the Dayspring from on high, the less in fact we realise we want for anything, for he brings and sheds all we can desire or deserve. Indeed, he is our every desire.

(Antiphon sung again by Cantor)