

Probably the most popular advent hymn of all time is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It combines a plaintive tune with a hopeful message that Christ will come to the people who await him. This week at daily Mass I've been explaining the origins of that hymn, and I'd like to share some of it with you, too.

Look at Worship II, #195. You'll see in small print at the top that the hymn dates from the ninth century, and that it comes from the "O Antiphons." Now if you switch to your Gather hymnal, # , you'll see another hymn called "For You O Lord." At the bottom the fine print tells you this hymn comes from the same source as O Come, O Come--the O Antiphons. Now if you go back to Worship II and turn to number 709 you can see all seven of these antiphons. People used to sing them with the magnificat at evening prayer on the seven days before Christmas. Each antiphon had its own day, each one began with the word "O"--they didn't include that in the English version here. They all give a title to Jesus and pray that he will come. The antiphon for today is number 6, O King of all nations. I'd like to sing the original chant for you. It goes like this: "O Rex gentium, et desideratus earum, lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum: veni, et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti." I just love these tunes; but we don't hear them much anymore. For centuries people all over the world could hear that tune every night the week before Christmas. Today's antiphon addresses Jesus as king of all the nations. In other words, he is the ruler of the world, not just of the Jews. He is the cornerstone who will make all things one.

The fundamental prayer of all the antiphons is the same prayer of the hymn, O Come, O Come Emmanuel: namely, "Come." Lord, we don't know where to go. You are Wisdom. Come. Lord, we are divided. You are King of all the nations. Come. Lord we are lost without you. You are Emmanuel, God-with-us. Come.

People expect a lot out of Christmas. We expect it to bring unity to families, joy to our hearts, and peace to the world--even if all year long our families are divided, our hearts are heavy, or the world is at war. We expect Christmas will make a difference. We want it to make a memory.

Perhaps our prayer this advent is, "Come. Come Lord and make this Christmas what it should be." If that's our prayer, then let us prepare our homes for Christ as we do for our holiday guests. We can do this. We can be a little more patient. We can be a little more joyful. We can be a little more hopeful. We can do this. We can prepare our homes for Christ as we do for our holiday guests. Then when we pray, "Come, Emmanuel; come, Wisdom; come, key of David; come king of the nations;" he will find a home in our hearts.