

December 1 The Advent responsory

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.... Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

—Matthew 25:31–33, 41–46

I look from afar:

And lo, I see the power of God coming,
and a cloud covering the whole earth.

Go ye out to meet him and say:

Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign over thy people
Israel?

High and low, rich and poor, one with another,

Go ye out to meet him and say:

Hear, O thou shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a
sheep:

Tell us, art thou he that should come?

Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come

To reign over thy people Israel.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
I look from afar, and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a
cloud covering the whole earth.
Go ye out to meet him and say:
Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign over thy people
Israel?

Words: The First Matins Responsory for Advent Sunday
Music: adapted from G.P. da Palestrina (c. 1525–94)

The singing of this responsory at the beginning of an Advent carol service on the first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the December season of penitence, anticipation, and hope. The words and music are derived from the doxology and chanted portions from the odd verses of the Magnificat by Palestrina (the Bible text of the Magnificat is Luke 1:46–55). The responsory text itself comes from the old Latin service of Matins (Morning Prayer). The version that has become popular through use at places such as King’s College Chapel, Cambridge, has harmonized responses.

This simple opening to Advent points us toward the return of Christ as judge and king, reigning over the whole earth, but also judging the whole earth, as the parable of the sheep and goats suggests.

The Bible says that when we die we are judged. Advent is the distinctive season for reflecting on the last judgment, which Matthew describes in the parable of the sheep and the goats. In that parable we are presented with a kingly Christ as judge. This means that it is his criteria, not ours, that form the basis of that judgment. It is Christ who has the power, not us, and this actually

means that he can do whatever he likes, but not in the sense that we can think what we “like” when it comes to death and judgment. We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, offering forgiveness, rescuing us from sin, and preparing a place for us in heaven. Therefore we have to acknowledge that when Christ sits on his heavenly throne, he can, and perhaps will, be very merciful indeed.

It would not be truly biblical of us to confine ourselves to an image of Christ sitting on a throne wielding absolute power. Christ is powerful, of course, but the Gospels are not a catalogue of his exercising worldly, judgmental power. They are rather accounts of how he shows that he has power, and, through his ministry, how he gently, bravely, and willingly lays it down. We are shown, in the account of his temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11), that Jesus had the power to be a very different kind of king—a tyrant who exercises absolute authority, governing through fear and the suppression of any alternative. But he rejected that approach, and it is fundamental to Christianity that we have a choice. Our king forces no allegiance from us, but frees us to love him, or not to do so.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrates his power to heal: cleansing lepers, casting out demons, curing the sick and lame. We also see Jesus’ intellectual power. He tells parables and confounds the religious leaders of his time both by asking awkward questions of his own and by evading theirs. Whether it is tax to Caesar or the fate of a sinner, Jesus conquers their cunning and prejudice. This also reveals his moral power, as does the idea that he is sinless, both in character and action.



As we consider the end of Jesus' ministry, we realize, as his disciples do, that this is the Messiah, in whom all things were made, whose name is above all names in this age and in every age to come. Yet, as soon as we realize this, we see it all slip away. Betrayal, arrest, trials, torture, execution all follow in swift succession. Where has his power gone? He has laid it down—surrendered it to human hatred. He, who is characterized as the Son of Man judging humans like sheep and goats, allows himself to be humanly judged, falsely convicted, and killed.

This kind of kingship and this kind of love are unique in history. This is the love of Christ, which inverts itself for the benefit of others, truly nourishing others. This kingship and this love are both about self-giving and the laying down of worldly power. That is why, if we want to think of Christ as a king, we must think of him not only as judge but primarily as the king of love. And it is the king of love whose return we anticipate and desire, not just in Advent, but at all times.

Prayer

As Advent begins, O Lord Christ, come again to reign over your people and enlighten all nations. Have mercy on all who look to you, and hasten that day when your justice and love will be revealed for the good of all creation and the glory of God the Father, with whom and the Spirit you are sovereign in majesty and power. Amen.

December 2 Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

—Isaiah 9:6–7

Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth,
And manifest Thy virgin birth:
Let every age adoring fall;
Such birth befits the God of all.
Begotten of no human will,
But of the Spirit, Thou art still
The Word of God in flesh arrayed,
The promised Fruit to man displayed.
The virgin womb that burden gained
With virgin honor all unstained;
The banners there of virtue glow;
God in His temple dwells below.

Forth from His chamber goeth He,
That royal home of purity,
A giant in twofold substance one,
Rejoicing now His course to run.
From God the Father He proceeds,
To God the Father back He speeds;
His course He runs to death and hell,

Returning on God's throne to dwell.
O equal to the Father, Thou!
Gird on Thy fleshly mantle now;
The weakness of our mortal state
With deathless might invigorate.
Thy cradle here shall glitter bright,
And darkness breathe a newer light,
Where endless faith shall shine serene,
And twilight never intervene.
All laud to God the Father be,
All praise, eternal Son, to Thee;
All glory, as is ever meet,
To God the Holy Paraclete.

Words: Ambrose of Milan (340–397), trans. John Mason Neale (1818–66)
Music: VENI REDEMPTOR plainsong Mode 1
PUER NOBIS NASCITUR Trier manuscript, 15th century

“Come, Thou Redeemer of the earth” often follows the Advent Responsory, which we considered yesterday. Often the responsory is sung at the west end of the church, and then the choir proceed eastward, singing this straightforward tune. It is a very effective way to open a service, with music and movement. As the choir walks eastward, they are walking in the direction of Jerusalem, toward the chamber of salvation, the “royal home” from which the Father sends his Spirit-begotten Son. Such a progression sets the scene for what is to follow: words and song telling forth the Advent promise of hope and light.

This carol is, as they say, one of the oldest ones in the book. Its author, Ambrose of Milan, was not actually Italian but was

born in Augusta Treverorum, which was then in Gaul (France), and is now known as Trier, in Germany. Hence he was a Roman citizen, who followed his father into a career in politics, being made governor of Aemilia-Liguria (northern Italy) around 370. When the bishop of Milan died in 374, the local lay people wanted Ambrose to succeed him. There was a major problem: Ambrose, while a believer, had not actually been ordained, or even baptized. After much soul-searching, he accepted the bishopric, and was hastily baptized and ordained. He became famous for his preaching and his role in the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He wrote treatises on ethics and on the sacraments, and some have even attributed the Athanasian creed to his pen. He is revered as a saint and a “doctor” of the church. His feast day is December 7 in both Roman Catholic and Anglican calendars.

This hymn, known originally in Latin as *Veni, Redemptor gentium*, dates from 397, the last year of Ambrose’s life, and was brought into English use by the Victorian poet and translator J. M. Neale, who, in his short life, made a very significant contribution to English hymnody. “Good King Wenceslas” is one of his own compositions, but he is better known for his many hundred translations from Latin and Greek. As we proceed into Advent, with Christmas as our destination, it is good to have a sketch map of the terrain ahead. And what a reminder! Here in microcosm we have the desire of nations expressed: “Come, Redeemer of the earth” and the anticipation of the virgin birth at Bethlehem, both in the first verse. We are reminded that the incarnate Christ, although born at a point in space and time, is still the Son of God. Christ reigns in glory as the Word made flesh, and dwells among us today in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Ambrose refers to Christ as the “promised fruit,” a lovely description that

recalls the “forbidden fruit” that tempts Adam and Eve, but that also hails Christ as the promised Savior anticipated by Isaiah and in the Psalms. Christ, the second Adam, turns forbidden fruit into promised fruit, fulfilling the pages of prophecy and bringing release to all those who, like the first Adam, are bound by sin.

The use of the word “fruit” is also reminiscent of the description of Jesus as “fruit of the womb of Mary” (Luke 1:42), and Ambrose writes of Jesus “coming forth” from the chamber that is his mother’s womb, the “royal place of purity.” Thus, from her is born a child, both human and divine. The fourth-century poetry is earthy and earthly, but in being so it combines the mystery of incarnation with the real presence of human birth.

In this rich passage of poetry there is much condensed, so that only hints of Isaiah’s words of promise can be detected. Ambrose’s deep theological insight encapsulates the promise and realization of salvation in Christ, whose birth is foreseen in Isaiah 9 and described in Luke 1–2. Thus his hymn is a treatise in itself, to which he brings a lifetime of spiritual study and pastoral wisdom. In this one hymn, he succeeds in doing something to which we devote the whole Advent carol service: unpacking the prophetic meaning of Old Testament passages and the gradual realization that they point to and predict the birth and ministry of Christ.

Prayer

O Lord our redeemer, whose incarnation manifests the love of the Father revealed in human flesh, breathe a new light upon your world, that the weakness of our mortality might be invigorated by your power and glory, until that day when all nations will bow down before your throne, on which you reign, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

December 3 Christus vincit

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Revelation 11:15-18

Christ conquers,

Christ is King,

Christ is the Lord.

O Christ, hear us.

To the Holy Church of God, uniting

souls across the divisions of the nations: perpetual peace!

Christ conquers...

King of kings. Our King.

Our hope. Our glory.

O Christ, hear us.

To all leaders of the nations, and

those entrusted to their care;

honor unstained, life and victory.

O Christ, hear us.

O King of the nations, and their

desire, the Corner-stone,

who makest both one.

Christ conquers...
Our aid.
Our strength.
Our invincible shield.
Our impregnable wall.
Our light, our way, and our life.
O Christ, hear us.
O Emmanuel, our King and
lawgiver, the goal of all nations
and their Savior.
Christ conquers...
To him alone be the sovereignty,
praise and rejoicing, through
unending ages of ages. Amen.
May they have happiness,
Who are redeemed by the
blood of Christ! And joy!
May Christ's peace come!
May Christ's kingdom come!
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Laudes Regiae: Words and chant eleventh century (or earlier)

This very ancient piece of music was originally used in French monasteries and churches when the king attended worship. An early manuscript is associated with Osmund, who, as bishop of Salisbury in the eleventh century, completed the building of the cathedral there.

Osmund is credited with the “Ordinal of Offices,” which, as the “Sarum Rite,” became widely used as the primary liturgical

service book throughout the south of England. The original is still preserved in Salisbury Cathedral. While the impact and meaning of “Christus vincit” is strong and regal, it can be both appealing and disturbing. In history it has been used to uphold and defend the power of kings, by allying their power to the power of Christ the King. How are we to understand or engage with the so-called kingship of Christ? There aren’t very many kings to relate to these days, and while there are reigning kings in various countries, they are generally constitutional monarchs, having little real power, serving as symbolic heads of state. While the power of kings or queens is not something with which we are particularly familiar these days, we are very familiar with the concept of power, for all around us people are exercising power on many levels and in different contexts, for better or worse. Power is really all about change. The people in power are those who can bring about, or prevent, change. In order to do this, there can be exploitative power at play, where violence or threats are involved. There can also be manipulative power, such that the desire is to shape another person’s or group’s behavior to suit one’s own ends. This can happen at international level or at a quiet, personal level. There is also competitive power—the kind of power that is often felt and wielded in playgrounds and boardrooms alike.

There are also positive models of power, such as integrative power, which is exercised in order to support or underscore another’s power. Integrative power backs other people up, defends them and stands alongside them, in sickness or in health, for better or worse. Integrative power creates a positive power base that is mutual and often outward-looking. This is a kind of fellowship power—strength in numbers, the power of trust and

teamwork. It is the kind of power that Jesus exercised throughout his ministry as he taught and trained the disciples to carry on his work and spread the gospel after his resurrection and ascension.

There is another positive form of power, which sociologists call “nutrient” power, which is power used on behalf of another’s greater good. This sounds a bit like the power of love, the power of putting someone else first, or at least of putting one’s own abilities, information, expertise, and desires at the service of others. This is the power of giving, both of self and of resources.

These are certainly not the models of power that the eleventh-century Norman conquerors or their clergy had in mind. Today, to help us toward a more contemporary way of understanding Christ’s kingship, we can think of these two kinds of power—integrative and nutrient power—remembering that Christ’s kingship is unique and is in some sense paradoxical. Christ certainly has power, but his sovereignty consists largely in the fact that he gave it up when he submitted himself to the human, destructive wills that put him on a cross to die. Christ’s sovereignty consists in weakness, belying a greater power. And that greater power is the power of divine love—love revealed, love laid down, love spent.

Prayer

O Christ our King, shine your light on our souls, that we may reflect your love. Deepen our vision, that we may see you more clearly. Refine us like gold, that we may become pure in your sight. Touch our hearts and lives, that we may always act for your sake, in the power of your love, for you lived and died for us, but now reign in glory. Amen.

December 4 Lo! he comes with clouds descending

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

—Revelation 1:3–8

Lo! he comes with clouds descending,
Once for favored sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluya!
God appears, on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing
Shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion
Still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exultation
To his ransomed worshipers:
With what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, Amen! let all adore thee,
High on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory:
Claim the kingdom for thine own:
O come quickly!
Alleluya! Come, Lord, come!

Words: Charles Wesley (1707–88) and John Cennick (1718–55)
Music: HELMSLEY. Melody notated by Thomas Olivers (1725–99)

This hymn, so often associated with Advent and rarely sung outside this season, is not necessarily best considered as purely appropriate for Advent. The words include “Alleluya,” a joyful outburst which some traditions exclude during Advent and Lent, as a somber gesture in keeping with the penitential flavor of the season. Thus it can be strange singing this hymn if we have “given up” alleluias for Advent! In other respects, though, this is an excellent Advent hymn, because it focuses on the second coming of Christ, which is often dwarfed by a pre-Christmas anticipation.

The opening lines are drawn from the book of Revelation and declare at the outset that this is no sugary Christmas carol but a hymn that relishes the return of our Lord. We are invited to look heavenwards, to see the promised Savior returning, just as John

prophesied in Revelation 1:3, echoing Daniel 7:13–15. And as he descends, the throng of the redeemed sweeps down to accompany his return in glory to earth, and those who nailed Jesus to the cross will at last see him as he is, the true Messiah. As the Messiah returns to judge, this may well cause those who have rejected him to “wail deeply.” The image is a strong one, and we are introduced here to a scene of glory and power, but also of tribulation, pain, and destruction. Such scenes are foretold by Jesus in Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21.

This apocalyptic element of Advent is one of the season’s key themes. We live in a kind of middle time—a period after the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, when God sent his Son into the world to carry the burden and weight of sin, so that he might open his arms for us on the cross, but also those days before the great end-time, when God shall bring all together. The end of the world is not something we generally want to contemplate, even though a basic knowledge of solar science indicates a future time when life on earth will not be sustainable. We can live in denial of such a future, and reconcile ourselves to the fact that it probably won’t affect you or me, but we cannot actually deny the reality of the end of the world, any more than we can deny its beginning.



Widely sung as this hymn is, we can’t help wondering how many people sing these words proclaiming the return of Christ, but lack any sense of the reality of such a proclamation. It is easy to sing about the return of Christ, but how much harder to believe it, and harder still to live in the light of passages of Scripture such as the opening verses of the book of Revelation, which proclaim the return of Christ, who was and is and is to come.

As we move into the Advent season ourselves, we might begin by considering how we react to these apocalyptic visions. Do we believe them? Do we act and speak as though this kind of second coming might actually happen? In our imaginations do we gaze with rapture on Christ's dazzling body, singing "Alleluia" and looking forward to the coming of his kingdom here on earth? And what do we feel about the possibility that it might happen tomorrow?

Prayer

Christ our true Messiah, we adore you, high on your eternal throne. Prepare us to accept that day when you claim your kingdom for your own, when you return in glory to confound all those who think of you as nothing more than an interesting historical figure. Come as judge, redeemer, and mercy-giver, so that all tears may be wiped away and all wailing turned to rapture, for you live and reign, in union with the Father and the Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

December 5 Wait for the Lord

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

—1 Thessalonians 5:4–11

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near,
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.

Words and music: Taizé Community

In the church, we traditionally associate waiting with this season of Advent. It is a time for pausing on our fast and hectic journey through life. One of the most effective ways to experience a sense of our Lord's return—to "wait for the Lord"—comes through contemplative music and prayer. I'm sure it is no coincidence that the kind of gentle, repetitive, contemplative singing revived by the Taizé community in France has been successful and popular because it enables us to engage with our own waiting spaces. This can be true whether we listen to music at home or participate in services using this kind of music. Silence

can be difficult to handle (some people definitely dislike it), but the music of Taizé has made a distinctive and vital contribution to the prayer lives of millions of people.

The Taizé community is not a commercial venture, nor does it insist upon a narrow doctrine to which its friends and members must adhere. Founded in wartime Burgundy by (Brother) Roger Schutz, a Swiss man who initially gave assistance to Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, the Taizé community grew after the war, spreading a message of reconciliation. By 1949, Roger had been ordained, and four Swiss and three French men took vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, joining the community. Committed to ecumenical relations (the breaking down of divisions among Christian denominations), the Taizé community became popular with young people. Taizé is a place distinguished by its freedoms of spirit, fellowship, and language, and most of all by its sense of community, which, although located firmly in France, is easily translatable to other places and contexts.

“Wait for the Lord” reminds us of another dimension of waiting that is typical of the Taizé approach to life and faith, for instead of excitement, fear, and anticipation, there is also gentle acceptance and harmonious patience as we wait for the Lord. We have been waiting a long time, repeating the same basic melody, yet perhaps embellishing it creatively, so that our interest, our desire, and our love are not wearied. The way Taizé chants are sung involves continuity and repetition combined with creativity and personality, expressed in communal worship. A simple melody is harmonized in a fairly straightforward way, which means that through repetition even inexperienced singers can learn their own part in the greater musical whole. Sometimes “canons” are used: divided groups sing the same tune a few notes apart, so

that the melody keeps entering over again and the music seems overlaid, every part harmonizing with every other part.

The simple but effective approach to communal music and prayer both speaks to and reflects today's age in a beautifully integrated way. Each time we participate in a Taizé chant, we are involving ourselves in a stationary time with God, waiting for God and waiting with God. When we emerge from such an experience, we find that while time appears to have stood still, held in musical check by mutual melody, we ourselves have made a little journey towards God, accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

In this time of waiting, we have an opportunity to reject the here-and-now of present living and engage with God over time, forming a deep and extended relationship, in the heart of which we can search and be searched out, know and be known. We not only wait for God, we wait with God. To do that takes time, but we do have time. Let us not waste it or lose it, for one day, inevitably, we will run out of time.

Prayer

God of day and night, keep us vigilant in faith and patient in praise, until that great day when Christ returns in clouds of glory to lift us to your heavenly throne. Amen.

December 6 St. Nicholas

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

—1 Timothy 3:1–7

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;

20 • O Come Emmanuel