

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel: Advent 0

French philosopher Simone Weil wrote: “At the center of the human heart is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world.” She describes this longing for the absolute good as “essentially the longing for the Incarnation. It is mistaken if it thinks it is anything else. The Incarnation alone can satisfy it.”

As Josh mentioned, we are exploring the Incarnation through the carols this Advent. I know people who want nothing to do with church or Christianity yet are lovers of Christmas, and especially carols. Carols bridge the gap between **Christmas as holiday and Christmas as holy day**. We wanted to explore what it was about carols, why they are loved and treasured, if not always understood, by so many. Approachable to the believer, and the mildly interested.

Advent is a season of longing for Christ to come. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, (God-with-us) is the classic Advent hymn about this longing. I want to play bit of a version that deeply moves me. It may seem slow, ugly even. I played it to Josh and he said it sounds like it is from the bowels. For me it best captures the pathos of the song, the deep sense of longing. **Jaye Thomas**

O Come, O Come Emmanuel has a long tradition. Seven antiphons, or refrains were chanted after the Magnificat, at vespers in monasteries in the days leading up to Christmas from about the 6th Century. These were based on titles for Christ taken from Isaiah.

- O Sapientia (Wisdom)
- O Adonai (Lord)
- O Radix Jesse (Root of Jesse)
- O Clavis Dauid (Key of David)
- O Oriens (Morning Star)
- O Rex Gentium (King of Nations)
- O Emmanuel (God-With-Us)

It is an acrostic poem. If you take the first letter of each of the titles in reverse, it spells *ero cras*, which translates to, “I will be there tomorrow.” This is Christ’s response to the cry of longing. It reminds us of the final words of Scripture,

“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” Let the one who hears say, “Come!” And let the one who is thirsty come, and the one who desires the water of life drink freely... He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

The lyrics of the hymn capture a universal longing.

- Longing for freedom from a sense of exile and captivity.
- Longing for freedom from tyranny and the grip of evil.
- Longing for dispersion of clouds of despair and depression
- Longing for a sense of home, peace, a turning away from the paths of misery.
- Longing for order, structure, and purpose to life
- Longing for the end of conflict, for peace and a putting away of our “sad divisions.”

Unlike the original hearers of Isaiah where this longing is first articulated; we are not a people oppressed by foreign captors, though we have brothers and sisters around the world for whom that is their experience. But each of us no doubt recognises our need to be freed from oppressions that prevent peace and justice being the established principles of our lives. Our need to be set free from fear of death and destruction that casts its gloom over much of the world. And to remember that it is to the world, not just the Church that God came and comes.

Something Josh and I have been noticing is that it seems each new week there is a discovery of another famous person, or intellectual, who is has come to faith in some way, or is discovering or rediscovering the meaningfulness, the power, and compelling nature of the Christian story. Not all of them have reached a place where they declare that they are Christians. A short list:

- **Paul Kingsnorth** – Environmental activist turned Wiccan to Zen Buddhist Orthodoxy
- **Martin Shaw** – Mythologist to Orthodoxy
- **Iain McGilchrist** – Renowned psychiatrist and neuroscientist who sees our brains as wired to be religious and conscious of the divine.
- **Jordan Peterson** – Psychological reading of Scripture
- **Michael Shellenberger** – Raised a Mennonite, rejected faith, but has since returned to Christianity seeing religion as the only solution to society’s intense anger and hatred.
- **Tom Holland** – Historian and author of *Dominion*, about the legacy of Christianity. As an historian of ancient Rome, he couldn’t get past the question, why was the values and ethics of the ancient world so repulsive and what changed, and just could move past the Gospel account of the man, hanging on the cross.
- **Nick Cave** – Australian rocker, who simply finds Christ compelling, and attends Church as he finds it ordering, particularly so after the loss of his son. He shared unabashedly about his longing for God in his book *Faith, Hope and Carnage*. Would stop short of calling himself a Christian, because of the baggage of the title, but we might say is a practicing Christian, given it is his actions, not the label that really matters.
- **Kat Von D** – Tattoo artist, pin up model, who shared on Instagram that she was parting with all her books on witchcraft and the occult, (Jul 2022), baptism video (Oct 4).

- **Ayaan Hirsi Ali** – Somali born Muslim, grew up in Kenya, came under the sway of Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, fled to Europe to escape a forced marriage, and became an avowed atheist. She was lauded by Dawkins and Hitchens of the new atheist movement as the most important intellectual to ever come out of Africa. Earlier this month she wrote an article on Unherd entitled *'Why I am now a Christian.'* In a subsequent interview this week, she shared about her own existential crisis and despair, the lack of meaning in her life. Seeing a therapist, who one day simply said to her, I think you are spiritually bankrupt.

But it is not just happening with celebrities and intellectuals. Just last week I was in the second-hand Christian bookshop in Mt Roskill, and I overheard a young man, early 20s, wanting to purchase a Bible to explore what this Christianity thing is all about. It was one of those moments I should have responded to more quickly, but by the time I acted on the impulse he was gone. All I can do now is pray for Ryan of New Lynn that people of faith come around him.

And Sylvia, one of our youth leaders, shared this with me this week: "It was really encouraging to see genuine curiosity and willingness to learn about Jesus in the student accommodation this year. I wasn't expecting many discussions about God, I was really surprised. People asking what God meant to me and what church I go to. A small group of people I knew, some completely new to faith started routinely going to Unichurch on Sundays. I've noticed there's a hunger in people my age for belonging, purpose, and peace. It's exciting that people are looking to find that in church and Christ, even if they don't identify as a Christian right now. Fellowship and prayer are extremely powerful. I can't recall a time I've seen hostility against Christianity this year, just openness and friendly discussions, between many different background and religions. It's been encouraging for my faith seeing God work in young people."

Something is going on. Aslan is on the move. There is a stirring happening outside the church, people longing for something more. As Josh has said many times, realising that the great human experiment of going it alone is coming apart at the seams. How will we respond?

The point behind sharing these different stories, is to remind ourselves that there are so many people all around us who are on a journey, longing for something more, the ultimate good, which Simone Weil said was really a longing for the incarnation. Longing for the Life-Light to birth in us our true selves as we have heard in John's gospel this morning.

The journey to faith in Christ may be slow and winding. It may begin as an intellectual journey, an emotional one, an existential one, an experiential one. Think of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was helped

along his journey to faith by one deep conversation with his friends Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, but this was the culmination of a slow, circuitous decades long journey out of atheism through appreciation of music, art, beauty, and culture, to a general belief in God two years before this conversation where he came to believe in Christianity. The path to faith is often slow and winding. Speaking of beauty, let's play a different version of O Come. **Malinda's version.**

Considering these different journeys and longing for Emmanuel, I have been reflecting on the faith of the Roman centurion in Matthew 8. He is an outsider. Culturally. Politically. A man of war. Religiously, maybe he was a God-fearer, but would have been a pagan. He professes longing for Jesus to heal his servant, he recognises Jesus' authority and says, "I am not even worthy to have you come into my home, but I know you have the authority to heal my servant from a distance." Jesus marvels at his faith and says, "many Gentiles will come from all over the world – from east and west – and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven." It was the centurion's longing, coupled with his act of trust in this compelling Rabbi from Nazareth that mattered. Not whether he had the right label. Believed all the right things.

What does this mean for us as a Church?

Firstly, I think we need to use this Advent to re-awaken our own sense of longing for Jesus, for the "Life-Light." Our longing for peace, hope, joy, and love. Like Lent, Advent is a season of repentance, hence the liturgical colour purple. Last year, Chris Clarke gave a fantastic analogy for repentance, of a plane readjusting course mid-flight. Sometimes, repentance requires a complete 180. Other times we might be just a few degrees off. Jesus' message was 'repent and believe' the good news, that God has come near, is Emmanuel. It means to turn (re-align), and put our trust in. Longing for Christ to come is the preliminary act of realignment. Perhaps we might understand "repent and believe" as "longing and acting upon that longing" towards Christ, Emmanuel, God-With-Us. To repent of where we have preferred exile and captivity to walking in the Life-Light of the One-Who-Is-With-Us. This week we are opening the church for people to come and pray, on your own or together (prayer times). We conclude this week by hosting the Auckland Prayer festival gathering on Friday night.

Secondly, let's be confident in the story that we inhabit. There is no more compelling narrative out there than that of the incarnate and crucified God, the Emmanuel, God-With-Us. To trust that there has been a cultural shift, not amongst everyone of course, but there seems to be a

greater openness. All these various people on their different journeys towards Christ have not happened in a vacuum. People are desperate for a better story to live by. Our young people are desperate for a better story to live by. Many migrants have come to this nation and city, seeking a better story to live by. How might this Advent we be compelling witnesses to the absolute good of the Incarnation? To our neighbours. Colleagues. Family members?

Christmas is far more than the story of a birth of a child. We ourselves are caught up in a story that calls us out of darkness to live in the light. Yet the church calendar recognises that the darkness lingers. After Christmas day is the feast of St Stephen, and then the feast of the Holy Innocents, two tragic days in the Church calendar. We are caught between the Kingdom come, and not yet. Each year we come, to wait, and long for Christ to come afresh in our lives, in our world. For more peace. More hope. More joy. More love. To encounter anew the Life-Light that blazes out of the darkness and which cannot put out. To long to be made our true, child-of-God selves. Let us repent and believe, in the God who has broken into the world, searching for hearts that are longing to be liberated by the Life-Light who stands at the door and knocks, searching for hearts that will prepare him room, and allow Christ to incarnate in and through us.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.