

ANCIENT WORDS

Reflections on the Advent Antiphons

ST MARYS CF10

ANCIENT WORDS

Reflections on the Advent Antiphons

ST MARYS CF10

dom
most high



Root of
set up as a
sign of the
peoples, and

claw

The Advent Antiphons

On 17th December, Advent takes a turning point, as we move closer to the celebration of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. During this time, each day is characterised by the 'O Antiphons,' ancient words dating as far back as the sixth century.

Each Antiphon tops and tails the Magnificat canticle at Evening Prayer, and is also used at the Gospel Acclamation at Mass.

Beginning with an 'O' to Christ and addressing him with a particular title found in Scripture, we ask him to accomplish something in our lives.

As well as used in the public worship of the Church, they can also become a beautiful prayer for each day as we approach Christmas.

This resource offers a short reflection on each antiphon of the day, followed by some further ideas for thought, discussion or prayer, and so can be used in discussion with others or in your own personal time of prayer. Alternatively, the reflections may be used as a homily at the weekday celebrations of the Holy Eucharist.

The O Antiphons

December 17

O Wisdom of the Most High, ordering all things with strength and gentleness, come and teach us the way of truth”

December 18

O Ruler of the House of Israel, who gave the law to Moses on Sinai, come and save us with outstretched arm.

December 19

O Root of Jesse, set up as a sign to the peoples, come to save us, and delay no more.

December 20

O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver, come and save us, Lord our God.

December 21

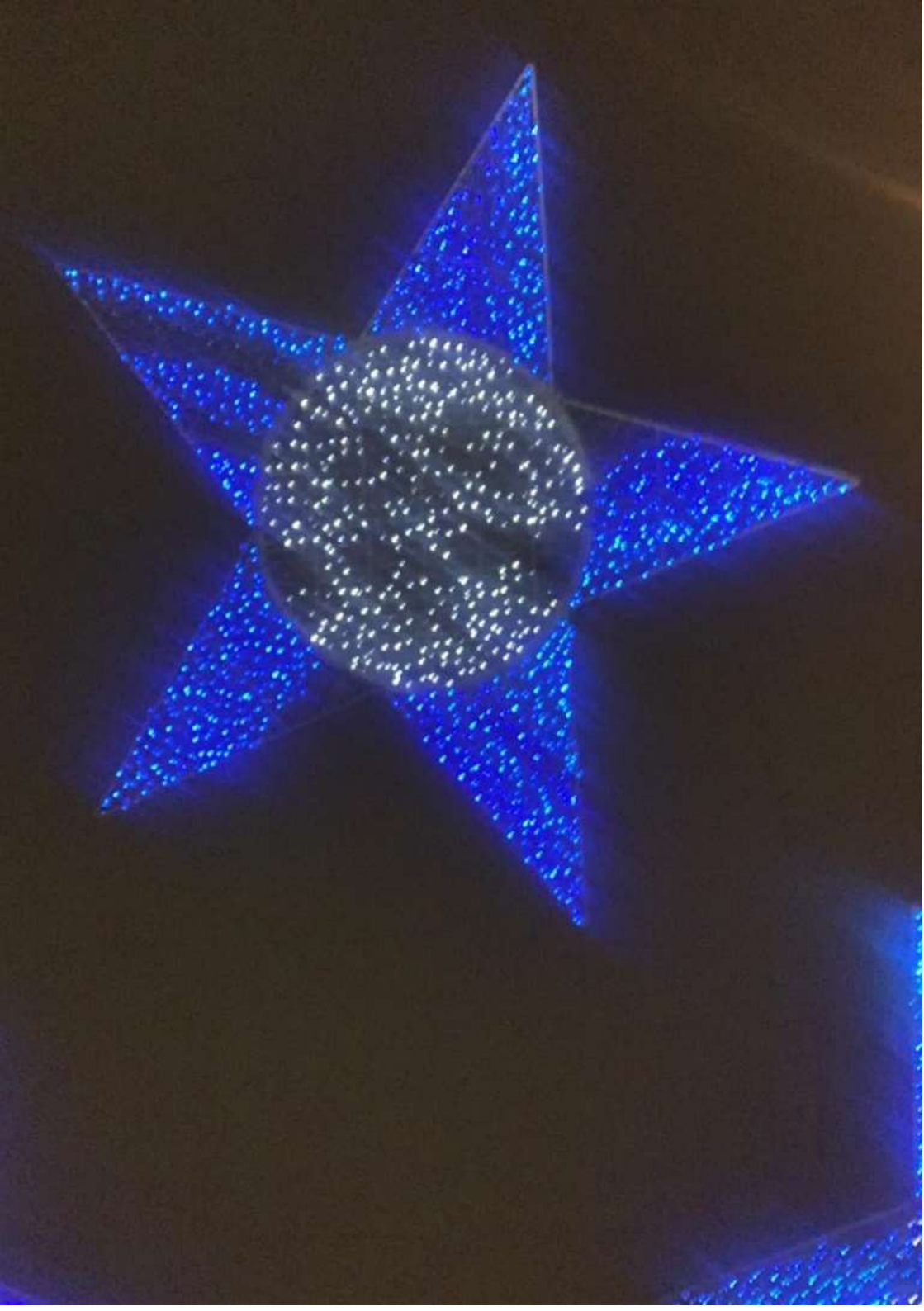
O Key of David, who open the gates of the eternal kingdom, come to liberate from prison the captive who lives in darkness.

December 22

O King of the peoples and cornerstone of the Church, come and save us, whom you made from the dust of the earth.

December 23

O Morning star, radiance of eternal light, sun of justice, come and enlighten those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.



17 December

Strength and Gentleness

‘O Wisdom of the Most High,
ordering all things with strength and gentleness,
come and teach us the way of truth’

Teaching has changed much over the years and many people among our older generation may remember a time when teachers were far sterner than they are today, and when corporal punishment was the order of the day!

Perhaps some will have memories of teachers who taught by intimidation and whose classes were ruled with fear! The other extreme, of course, are softer individuals with little or no control over their class and where little teaching can take place.

Perhaps, in between, we find those teachers who are caring and friendly, and generate enthusiasm for their subject but will also take no nonsense, with very clear boundaries set for the class. To use perhaps the parlance of the first ‘O Antiphon’ they teach with ‘strength and gentleness.’

St Paul says that Jesus is ‘the Wisdom of God.’ We know that Jesus was a Rabbi, a teacher, and he drew to him those who listened to his teaching, particularly the Twelve whom he took aside for special instruction. It was to them that Jesus proclaimed himself to be ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life.’

The first 'O Antiphon' of December bids Jesus come close so that he may teach us in the way of truth. It was through him and for him that all was created, and in the poetic words of Genesis, we see order being created out of chaos.

There is much chaos in the world today, and the phrase 'fake news' brings further chaos, with conspiracy theories driving people apart. There is a worrying polarity emerging. Often, we are driven apart by ignorance of one another, and into this void are poured false rumours and misleading platitudes, fuelling the fire of cynicism and hate.

As Advent takes us closer to our celebration of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, we pray that he may guide us into the way of truth, with strength and gentleness, bringing order to our chaotic world, inspiring us to seek peace, justice and reconciliation, and drawing closer to each other in love.

O Wisdom of the Most High,
ordering all things with strength and gentleness,
come and teach us the way of truth

Think about

- What circumstances require both strength and gentleness?
- What chaos exists in the world, in your community in your life?
- What does 'justice' mean for Christians?
- How do we deal with disagreements in the Church?

18 December

The Law of Love

‘O Ruler of the House of Israel,
who gave the law to Moses on Sinai,
come and save us with outstretched arm.’

Imagine a world in which any or all of us could do what we wanted, whenever we wanted with no regard for others. What kind of world would that create? How much chaos would there be?

Every society, no matter how new and how different, will soon start to agree upon a common way of living, a bond of behaviour, a pact of what’s expected from its members. Whether we call them ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ or ‘standards of behaviour’, the system is the same. We need boundaries. We need to know what is acceptable and what is not.

Some laws, of course, may be unpopular, and there are often laws which may be outdated, eventually challenged and changed to undo injustice and create a fairer society, as we grow and develop and change.

There are different ways of ruling, too, and some rulers have, we know, taken their power to devastating results, destroying lives, demeaning what it means to be human. There are still so many people in the world today who cannot flourish because of evil regimes and totalitarian rule.

Freedom as the children of God doesn’t mean that God, as Father, wants us to run amok and live aimlessly and selfishly. That’s not freedom at all.

The most loving parent, at times, will in some way, correct or discipline a child for their own safety and well-being. They may shout at them as they try to cross the road in front of oncoming traffic, give them a glaring look if their cheek gets the better of them, or make them do things against their will because they know what is right for them. After all, who wouldn't send their child to school just because a child preferred to stay at home watching TV or allowed them not to clean their teeth simply because they couldn't be bothered.

Moses' first attempt to deliver the law which God gave him on Mount Sinai met with frustration and disappointment, and anger too. The stones inscribed with the law of God were smashed against the graven image the people had made in their impatience, as they looked aimlessly for other more self-indulgent ways of living.

When Jesus comes, he does not do away with the law given to Moses. There is no smashed stone, no fragmented law, no hiding what has gone before. In fact, he sums up the law of God succinctly and beautifully, simply in the need to love God and love our neighbour.

One of the few commands Jesus gave was simply to love. On the night before his death, he stooped to his disciples' feet to wash them, and told them to follow his example of love and service.

When it is stripped back, the Christian faith is not a complicated set of rules and laws to hinder and take away our freedom. Christ rules with the law of love, his Kingdom is one with love at its heart.

His outstretched arm is not one which comes with a slap or a fist. The hand he stretches out to us is a hand which bears the mark of pain and sacrifice, the wounds of love. He rules with compassion and love, a love which transforms and changes us. Do we believe this? Can it really be true?

O Ruler of the House of Israel,
who gave the law to Moses on Sinai,
come and save us with outstretched arm.

Think about

- Are there particular laws or rules either in society or the church which disturb or irritate you?
- Do you consider yourself as a leader in any way?
- What are the qualities of your leadership?
- How do we cope with being told what to do?
- Who do we find it most difficult to love?

19th December

Worth your weight

‘O Root of Jesse,
set up as a sign to the peoples,
come to save us, and delay no more.’

How do we prove our worth? In job interviews, we have to put ourselves out there, prove that we are the best for the job, talk about our achievements, say how good we really are! Some people find this easier than others. Under those circumstances, if we play down our achievements, we’d definitely lose out.

Even the church has taken to this way of appointing priests to parishes. Clergy apply for parish positions, tell the bishop and the interviewing panel how suited to the job they are.

Promotions come, quite often, because someone is seen or heard to be achieving good things or because they fit comfortably into someone’s expectations. Those who don’t make a song and a dance may go unnoticed, even undervalued, played down, looked over, disregarded.

The experience of Jesse tells another story. When looking for a king to rule Israel, the prophet Samuel visits his home, parades his way through his sons, all of whom stand tall and proud. But something is missing, the runt of the family, who seems to be overlooked, as he quietly does his shepherding job, away from the attention of others.

He is neither tall nor kingly looking, has no one to speak for him, or talk about his credentials. In fact, there is surprise at his selection but Samuel sees something that others cannot.

Jesus is a descendant of Jesse, and so a descendant of David, the King. As king he does not appear to show regal signs of power. He has come in humility, and so many people simply cannot see any sign of Messiahship, any credentials of what it means to be Christ, the Anointed One. Their version of God does not allow him a place. He is, after all, a runt of the people. 'Nothing good can come from Nazareth,' it was said of him.

There is no mention about how well he can play a crowd or work a room and yet, there he is, teaching with authority. His miracles are signs of God not magical displays of power, signs that God's kingdom has come, that the world is being transformed. People are drawn to him. They see in him a sign from God who always seems to favour runts!

So do not give in to the 'Imposter syndrome', that somehow you are just not good enough, and cannot be what others expect. Don't care too much about what others don't see in you. Don't measure yourself by the standards of others although, by all means, take some inspiration from them, even if the inspiration is to discover afresh what is good and unique about you, and what you are able to achieve. Don't lose sleep over those who are standing tall whilst you are being left behind.

There is much to be said for quiet faithfulness, a humility which is not brash or brazen, does not look down on others, does not label others as 'this' or 'that' simply as a means of dismissing and deriding them.

'Go on quietly doing the work that has been given you', said St Paul. At some point, when the time is right, without even having to push forward what others cannot see, the Lord may say, 'Well done good and faithful servant' but only, of course, if we set our eyes on Christ, the sign to us that God has come to save us and will save us still. The One who

transforms even the little that we have and makes mountains out of the molehills of our lives. This is the God in whom we believe, God who has come to us in Christ, the root of Jesse, the sign for the peoples. It is in him, and him alone, that we find our worth.

O Root of Jesse,
set up as a sign to the peoples,
come to save us, and delay no more.

Think about

- How much do you care about how other people view you?
- Are their views important to you?
- Are there times when we feel out of our depth or experience what may be called 'Imposter Syndrome'?
- Do you feel valued in your work or personal life?
- Are there people you know who may be being overlooked?



20th December

Recognising Royalty

‘O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver,
come and save us, Lord our God.’

These days we rarely see the old black and white movies played out on TV, unless we can find them on a special channel deep in our TV Menu page. There we may discover the likes of Cary Grant and Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Ginger Rogers, James Stewart and Jack Lemon, to name just a few.

Lots of movies stand out, like ‘Some like it Hot’ and ‘White Christmas’ and ‘Bringing up Baby’ and then there is the memorable ‘Roman Holiday.’

Fed up of the palace restrictions, the princess, played by Audrey Hepburn, escapes into the streets of Rome, experiencing things for the first time, courting (almost) a young journalist (Gregory Peck) before she returns to her royal duties.

Only a few people in Rome recognised the royal presence. Everyone was oblivious to who she was as she danced and laughed and fell in love. They just didn’t know that royalty was among them.

One of the beautiful titles given to Jesus is ‘Emmanuel’, a name which means ‘God is with us.’ Christ’s birth in Bethlehem heralds a new age, a new time, when God becomes involved, in a very human and tangible way, in the world he has created. He walks among us, experiences

everything it means to be a human-being, except sin, as St Paul reminds us.

After his Resurrection as he ascends to Heaven, Jesus tells his Apostles, “I will be with you always, to the end of time.” The Incarnation isn’t simply a past event. Jesus has been and will always be present among us. He gives us signs of his presence, gifts through which we feel his saving touch both within and without the life of the church.

His grace is not restricted, and yet he has chosen to make his presence known in many ways. The Eucharist is such an important part of our life together. We are commanded to “Do this in remembrance” of him. It is one of the most beautiful ways in which we receive the presence of Jesus.

We are what we eat. We become what we celebrate. The Church has been called an extension of the Incarnation, the continuing presence of Jesus in the world, the Body of Christ.

Recognising Jesus in ‘the breaking of the bread’ means that we must recognise him too in the brokenness of the world, in the poor and those outside the walls of the church. As the Body of Christ, we are called to be and become his presence in the world but we also meet him in those whom we serve.

‘You will have the poor with you always,’ said Jesus. So, let’s eagerly receive Jesus who comes to us in the Eucharist, and be his presence to others, and let us always be alert to him in the lives of those we are called to serve.

O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver,
come and save us, Lord our God.

Think about

- Can you think of times when you have vividly experienced the presence of God?
- How important is the celebration of the Eucharist to you?
- Who are the poor in your community and how can or do you serve them?
- How does the worship in your church relate to the poor in your community?
- What does the description of the Church as the Body of Christ mean to you?



21st December

Behind Closed Doors

‘O Key of David, who open the gates
of the eternal kingdom,
come to liberate from prison
the captive who lives in darkness.’

In a funny yet touching song written and performed by comedian Tim Minchin, called Not Perfect, one of the verses goes *“This is my house / And I live in it / It’s made of cracks / And photographs / We rent it off a guy who bought it from a guy / Who bought it from a guy / Whose grandad left it to him / And the weirdest thing is that this house / Has locks to keep the baddies out / But they’re mostly used to lock ourselves in”*

In recent years there has been debate around one of the responses to homelessness and rough sleeping, in particular the various architectural designs added to buildings and the built landscape to prevent people from gathering in or sleeping in particular areas. Often, this has come from pressure from some parts of the community who struggle with the effects of such activity.

It’s a difficult juggling act: to weigh up the needs and rights of those who have no home and no front door, and the rights of others in our community who want a safe and clean environment in which to live. The debates which follow are often polarised and, quite understandably, filled with emotion and, sometimes, misunderstanding.

And yet you could say that all of us have aggressive architecture built into our homes. We have garden walls and garden gates to mark out our property and dissuade people from trespassing and coming too close. We have front doors to stop people from wandering in at will, as well as to keep the cold out! And these doors have locks, of course, “to keep the baddies out” or maybe, as the song goes, “mostly used to lock ourselves in.”

In recent years, too, we have been grappling with the phenomenon of cuckooing when vulnerable people have their homes taken over by criminal gangs and drug dealers. They live in fear, locked in, hidden away from the world who are oblivious to all the things that can happen behind closed doors.

Into this domestic dilemma of locked doors and homelessness comes Jesus, the key of David, as he’s called in today’s O Antiphon.

Having the key to something or somewhere means having access and even power, the ability to allow people to come and go, to open up and let them in, or close them out, to keep them out. It’s a symbol both incarceration and liberation.

Just as King David, from whose family line Jesus has descended, had the keys to the holy city of Jerusalem, so Jesus now has the keys to the heavenly Jerusalem, opening the life of heaven through his liberating death and resurrection.

He comes, too, to liberate those who are imprisoned, those who live in darkness. What this darkness is, of course, is different for each person, each place.

He comes to open doors, to let us out, to free us perhaps from the traps of poverty or mental health, drug dependency or fractured friendships, the pain of unemployment or lost lives. He liberates us from loneliness

and isolation, from the slog of working too hard, or being worked too hard by others.

He frees us from the fear of being used by others, of being tossed about on the wind of change, a victim of decisions made by others, a fear of one's own life slowing down, as the world moves on too fast, too quickly.

Wherever and whatever the darkness is, Christ comes with the key to open the doors, enters our darkness to bring light, to help us see the way.

Whilst so many social and personal problems remain in the world, we can trust in Christ who comes to save us, who changes our perspective on what it means to live, and to raise our hearts and minds to heaven.

'All of us are in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars," wrote Oscar Wilde in one of his plays. Christ has already been there, in the gutter, and is there still, alongside us.

O Key of David, who open the gates
of the eternal kingdom,
come to liberate from prison
the captive who lives in darkness.

Think about

- What are the things which restrict us today?
- How does the freedom we experience restrict others?
- Who are the captives and prisoners in our own community?
- How can we preach and share a gospel that liberates?
- How open and welcoming is our church to others?



22nd December

Dust and Glory

‘O King of the peoples
and cornerstone of the Church,
come and save us,
whom you made from the dust of the earth.’

Towns and cities get ready early for Christmas as they try to lure in Christmas shoppers to their high streets, luring them in with bargains, lights and decorations, piped seasonal music and festive food.

Whilst many businesses and shops have taken a hit during the last year and a half of lockdown, many are beginning now to re-emerge, and some the buildings of our towns and cities are being repurposed and redeveloped.

Plans are often ambitious as one city competes with another, and there always seems to be some development or other. What, though, holds a growing city together? Finance? Retail? Profits? Politics? Glitz and glamour? Music and entertainment? Business and Tourism? All are important, and then some.

Perhaps the real question to ask is where or what is the heart of a city? What is the heart of a place that is growing, seeing the skyline change, watching communities expand and merge? What are the cornerstones of the communities of which we are a part, their defining qualities, their true character?

We must ask this of the Church, too. On what or who do we depend? What or who is at the heart of our life together? The answer comes in today's Advent Antiphon. Christ is the cornerstone of the church. He is the one on whom we depend, the one who defines us, our beating heart.

It is easy to slip away from this truth, to engage in so many projects, many of which are worthwhile, follow so many changes, be active and busy but lose sight of who we are and what we are, and why we're doing them at all. Christ is the cornerstone. For us there is no getting away from this, and everything we do, we do for him who comes to us whom he made from the dust of the earth.

On Ash Wednesday, when we receive the ashes upon our foreheads, we hear the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." They draw us back to our humble beginnings, and our mortal end. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Some years ago, at the Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage, in a creative reimagining in Summertime, the young people were invited to receive the sign of the cross upon their forehead in glitter with the accompanying words, "Remember you are dust bound for glory."

"In his own image God created man / And when from dust he fashioned Adam's face / The likeness of his only Son was formed:/ His word Incarnate, filled with truth and grace."

So goes a hymn sung at Evening Prayer. We are made in the image of God and, as at the Creation God gazes upon the image of his Son when he looks upon humanity, so too in the Incarnation when we gaze upon Jesus, we see God's image and what it means to be a perfect human being. "God became human so that human beings can become divine," said St Augustine. He transforms the dust of which we are made.

To a packed square of thousands of young people in Manila on World Youth Day, St John Paul II said, “You are made to live with God for ever.” All those young people with hopes and plans, ambitions and dreams for the future, are reminded that their future lies further ahead, far ahead, for eternity is the life upon which we should set our hopes.

We are fashioned from the earth; we are dust and ashes but with Jesus as our cornerstone we can hope to live with him for ever. Eternity beckons.

O King of the peoples
and cornerstone of the Church,
come and save us,
whom you made from the dust of the earth.

Think about

- What is at the heart of and defines the place where we live?
- How would you describe the life of your church?
- Is Jesus at the heart of all that you do and plan?
- How fearful are you of your own death?
- How can you, as a Christian, bring comfort to those who are bereaved?



23rd December

Do not be afraid

‘O Morning star,
radiance of eternal light, sun of justice,
come and enlighten those
who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.’

Christmas 2020. We had expected a five-day window of relaxation of COVID restrictions but that glimmer of light was overshadowed by new lockdown rules and a different kind of Christmas altogether.

Plans were aborted and families separated. There was disruption and disappointment. There was doom and gloom when all that people were seeking was comfort and company, warmth and light.

Amid those Christmas disruptions, celebrations continued in some shape or form. Christmas couldn't and can't be cancelled. For who can cancel the yearly reminder of the Incarnation, and the honouring of the presence of Jesus, the Morning Star marking the onset of a new dawn, a new day. This year, we hope, people's experience will be quite different.

A constant phrase in Holy Scripture as God relates to his people is the message 'Do not be afraid.' Time and time again we hear those words. There has been much fear over the last eighteen months and many dark times but Christmas is *for* those dark times. Christ comes to enlighten those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.

We fill our homes with lights and bright decorations, evergreen trees and holly wreaths as we cling to signs of life. At the deepest and darkest hour, at the midpoint of the night, we gather to celebrate the Mass of the Nativity at Midnight, a powerful symbol of the power of Christ's light.

It was during the night that shepherds hear the angels' message. The sky is illuminated, and heaven's song breaks out across the dark land. They leave their secluded spot on the hills to see all that they have heard.

In the book of Wisdom, we read "Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior."

The shepherds did not set their sights on a warrior as the world would describe one but this small child who lay in a feeding trough would be the one to liberate Israel, the one to free us from the shadow of death, the darkness, the doom and the gloom.

Perhaps the angel's message given to Mary and his words "Do not be afraid" were constant companions along her journey, as she grappled with uncertainty and confusion but gave herself wholeheartedly to Jesus her son and her Saviour.

She is filled with love for her child, and she knows, even by the arrival of those first visitors, that her child can never be just for her and her alone. The act of loving comes with sacrifice. Love changes everything but it comes at a cost. There will be dark times but Christ is the Morning star, the radiance of eternal light, the sun of justice, who comes to enlighten those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death. He enters the doom and the gloom of our lives with the light of his love. So do not be afraid.

O Morning star,
radiance of eternal light, sun of justice,
come and enlighten those
who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Think about

- What do we fear?
- What sacrifices do you make because you love?
- What kinds of darkness overshadow people?
- How can we bring God's light to them?
- Have our preparations for Christmas drawn us nearer to Christ?



