

O Come O Come Emmanuel

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[0 : 00] Well, there's a bit of work to do right now. You need to take out the service sheet and turn to page 7, and also the Bible and turn to Isaiah 40, which means you've got to put your phone down.

I'm sorry, there's no texting now. Well, no, if you have a Bible on your phone, it's fine. And if you have a sermon on your phone and it's better than this one, it's fine.

I said that foolishly at the 8 o'clock, and a number of people are quite cross afterwards, so you can do what you like. We once at St. John's, it's got nothing to do with the sermon, we once at St. John's, I asked someone at the staff to look at one of those blockers where you block all the signals coming in, and we found a website that was in Ukraine that had this blocker beside a ground-to-air missile launcher.

So we decided against it. You'll be pleased to know. Now, there's a number of recent surveys in the States and Canada and the UK that shoppers are irritated by Christmas music starting too early. And there's a reason for this. There's a reason for Christmas music in the stores. In the 1970s, Garda University and Northwest University studied and demonstrated that music was a key part of what they call retail atmospherics.

[1 : 36] There are a number of universities done long studies on this. Did you know customers, we, customers buy, make our buying decisions more on retail atmospherics than on the product itself?

This is true. Because, and especially music, because music goes past the emotions, so the theory goes, passes our rational decisions, so we'll reach into our pockets and spend more money.

So, if you're in a store and it's playing a well-known Christmas song, you'll spend more, buy more without really thinking about it. And what's very interesting about these irritated surveys is that the questions have everything to do with about how loud the music is, how early it comes, or how irritating the music is.

But they completely ignore the fact that we're being manipulated to spend more money. Now, as Christians, we sing, we write songs, and we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs because of our God.

We want a way to express our highest joy and our greatest sense of praise to God because he is beyond compare.

[2 : 51] We also want hymns to capture the depth of our sorrows and our sin and our sadness and our lament that we've not loved him as we should. But we sing because of what God's done and what he's revealed and what he's promised.

It's almost too good to be true. And don't you get this sense that when we're singing our hymns, we're lifting ourselves up into what is almost too good to be true because God is beyond wonderful. And we sing to strengthen each other. I hear you singing. It strengthens my faith. Most of you. We sing to speak to God.

We sing to speak to each other. We speak in the language of praise because, you know, his loving kindness is better than love himself. And the music of the Christmas and Advent season that we start today is a special reservoir of spiritual strength and encouragement focused on the greatest revelation in history, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, his salvation. And over the next five weeks, we're taking a break from the Gospel of Matthew and we're doing a series called Christ in the Carols. And each week we're going to take one well-known Christmas and Advent hymn and look at it more closely.

[4 : 09] And then we'll look at a text description beside it. And today on page seven, it's O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. We've sung a verse already. We're going to sing this after the sermon, after the prayers. If you just look at the top of it, this goes back more than 1,200 years.

And it was gathered together into a Latin poem in the 1300s, as it says at the top. It originally had seven verses and monks in monasteries would sing one verse per day in the week leading up to Christmas, preparing for Christmas.

It was translated into English by John Neill in 1851 and he chose a French melody and we sing it throughout the Christmas seasons. Each of the verses are known as an O antiphon.

O antiphon is just another Latin word for a little verse, a little refrain, a short verse. And if you look down the verses, every verse begins with O.

So they're called O antiphons. But the thing about saying O is, and I know I shouldn't say this, I probably shouldn't say, I will say this, that so much contemporary music says O, O, O, O, O, and I'm never sure whether it's good or bad.

[5 : 31] This is a deep and passionate cry from the heart. It is a prayer to Jesus. It's O Come, please come, Emmanuel.

There aren't many prayers to Jesus in our hymns or in the Bible. This is one of them. It's one of the best ones. And the way it works is that each verse gives us a different name of Jesus from the Old Testament and meditates on that name for a moment or two.

And each of the names comes from the prophet Isaiah who prophesied 700 years before the coming of Christ. It's very clever. We'll have a look at this a little bit later.

We've got more reason than Isaiah had to sing this hymn because we've seen how God has fulfilled many of these promises in the person of Jesus Christ.

And we've seen that some of them still wait for fulfillment as well. We've seen God come in the flesh. We've seen his redeeming grace and love and his death and resurrection.

[6 : 33] But we're waiting for that day when he completes this work and we see him face to face, faith turned into sight. So just look at a couple of verses. Look at verse 2.

O come thou rod of Jesse free. The name of Jesus, rod of Jesse. Thine own from Satan's tyranny, from Satan's depths of hell, sorry, from depths of hell thy people save.

Give them victory out of the grave. Rejoice. This comes straight out of Isaiah 11. So if you want to just turn back, keep your hand in Isaiah 40. Dive back to Isaiah 11 for a moment.

Jesse is the name of King David's father. David, the first human Messiah in the Old Testament.

Verse 1 of Isaiah 11. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse. So at the time Isaiah is writing, the people of God had been devastated by their own sin, their own rejection.

[7 : 32] It was a miserable time. And it was like a bushfire, a forest fire had gone through and burnt everything down. Everything was just burned stumps.

And one stump, the family stump of Jesse, there is a shoot that will grow. A little rod. That's what it means. A rod of Jesse.

A branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And what's this one who's going to come? What's his rule going to be like? The Messiah. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.

The spirit of wisdom and understanding. The spirit of counsel and might. The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight will be in the fear of the Lord. He won't judge by what his eyes see or decide disputes by what he hears.

He's not going to be influenced. But with righteousness he will judge the poor. He will decide with equity for the meek of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips.

[8 : 28] He shall kill the wicked. This is Jesus. In the New Testament, the New Testament says, applies this to the person of Jesus Christ because the kingdom has come.

But we know that we wait until the second coming when Jesus will come and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. So you see, this hymn is a way of celebrating and meditating on the coming of Jesus, who he is.

And each name takes us down a different avenue of thought. Take verse 4. The key of David. Come now. Key of David. Come. Open wide our heavenly home. Make safe the way that leads on high. Close the path to misery.

It's a quote from Isaiah 22. God says, I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open and no one shall shut. He shall shut and no one shall open.

And we know that when Christ came and he died for us and he opened the way through his resurrection to eternal life and the key to heaven. But we wait. We wait for the day when there's going to be no door between us and God.

[9 : 31] And that's why we sing. But there's one central thing in this hymn that comes again and again and again, repeated in every verse. One central concern.

Class, what is it? It's the word.

It's the idea of coming. So you see, O come, O come. And the word Emmanuel means God with us. And at the end of every verse, we sing Emmanuel shall come to thee.

It's God being with us. Jesus Christ born in Bethlehem is God with us. It's very important at Christmas to remember this.

Not just a great teacher. Not just a miracle worker. God in human flesh. Come to us. Come for us. Come as one of us. And his coming fills our hearts with longing for the day when we will see him face to face.

[10 : 39] When we will be with him. Now, there is one chapter in the book of Isaiah which takes us to this promise more than any other. And it is Isaiah 40.

So if you have that open in front of you, that would be terrific. Just the first 11 verses. And the problem with Isaiah is that it's so impossibly rich.

It's difficult, I think, for some of us. Well, the temptation is to wonder whether this can possibly really be true. Is it just exaggeration? The one central burden of Isaiah 41 to 11 is this.

It's not just a vague, nice hope. It is that God is coming to be with us. So look down at verse 9. The last two lines in verse 9.

The burden of Isaiah 40 is not a human-centered message.

[11 : 42] It's God-centered. Or more accurately, it's Jesus-centered. Because we know that Jesus fulfills this. That's why preaching that pleases God is not preaching that's sort of counseling to make us feel better.

However, preaching ought always to be about God, his love and his power and his grace. It's always relevant. It ought to specifically be about the person of Jesus Christ. You know the story of the English curate who was visiting with his bishop.

And the bishop said to him, how's your preaching? He said, what should I preach, bishop? I don't know what to preach. And he said, preach about God and preach about 20 minutes. So how does the chapter begin?

Verse 1. God himself speaks. These are the words of God. Comfort. Comfort, my people, says your God. God has to repeat himself because he feels this so intensely.

Because the reality is until this point in the book of Isaiah, until chapter 39, you can take and have a read of it later, God's people have abandoned him. They've rejected him. They've gone after other gods.

[12 : 54] They've turned. They've been selfish. They've lived for themselves. And God is about to expel them out of the land where they're going to go into exile. But here, before they go into exile, God wants messengers to speak a word of double comfort.

And I think that's another reason why God says it twice. It's because it's so hard to believe. It's so hard to believe this genuine word of comfort from God when we're straying and wandering at other things on the mind and we've tried to play God.

If we're honest with ourselves, we make a complete mess of it. But it's hard to be honest with ourselves. And that's why we find it hard to hear this word of comfort. But God says, comfort.

Comfort, my people.

It's a command. It's a command that we should comfort God's people. And the answer comes, there are three voices in this chapter that get on with it.

In verse 3, a voice cries. In verse 6, a voice says, cry. And in verse 9, lift up your voice, O Jerusalem.

[14 : 01] And these three voices tell us three things about God. This is where I'm going to spend most of my time, the rest of our time. Three things about God. The first is God's greatness. God's greatness.

Verse 6, the second voice. I love this voice. A voice says, cry. And I say, what shall I cry? Very helpful. We don't have to make our message up ourselves.

We don't invent it. Pulpit should not be used to promote ourselves. This guy gets his message from God. And what is the message? What is this great message from God that's so comforting?

Verse 6, all flesh is grass. And all its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers.

The flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. Is that a bit of a letdown? You might even say it's a bit of a cliché.

[15:01] You know, our lives are very short. Surely I don't need the Bible to tell me that. But there's absolutely nothing cliché about this. Because these verses explain why our lives are so short.

And the reason is in verse 7. The grass withers. The flower fades. And the word is better translated because the breath of the Lord blows on it.

The breath of the Lord, the spirit of God, we know from the rest of the Bible, is the spirit of life. But he also blows on humanity and brings death.

Because as humans, we are under the judgment of God. You see, all the beauty of humanity, our brilliance, our achievement, our artistic wonderfulness, our technology.

We're amazing, aren't we, as humans? You know what? It all comes to nothing. And why are our lives so short? Why is it that when you go and visit museums overseas, you can see civilization after civilization that's just withered like grass?

[16:09] Why do we only live 80, 90 years? And the answer here is because of the Holy Spirit. We've rejected God. We've walked our own way. We've put barriers between us and God.

And we've cut ourselves off from him. And that's exactly why God speaks here. Stay with me, please. Verse 8. His word, this is what he says. My word is able to plant eternal life into you as human beings whose lives are like grass.

Verse 8. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. This is not just a contrast between our quick lives, our transience, and the eternity of God's word.

The word of God is not just in contrast to the shortness of our lives. It is the cure for it. And the New Testament quotes this verse and says, This word is the gospel.

It is the good news which you've heard preached to you. So as we hear the great good news of God's coming from the word of God, God takes the seed of eternal life, which is in his word, and plants it in our hearts.

[17:24] And that seed has the power to outlast this world. Here, Peter calls it the living and abiding word of God. This is the greatness of God.

Not just that he's sovereign ruler over all, a source of all life. True. But he makes promises to us in the gospel. And when we listen to the gospel, when we hear the gospel, and we respond in faith, that seed, that eternal seed, takes root in our hearts and bears fruit for eternal life.

Eternal, eternal life that goes on forever and ever and ever. God's greatness, number one. Second, God's gentleness. Please look back at verses one and two.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her. The word tenderly literally means speak to her heart, upon the heart.

It's not just a kindness. But God wants this news of comfort to come onto and into our hearts in such a way that we get refreshment and comfort from him.

[18:42] He wants us to know his gentleness, his tenderness. And it's exactly what our hearts most want to hear. And he gives three reasons in verse two. Her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned, and she has received from the Lord's hand double from all their sins.

Warfare literally means bitter struggle, bitter hard service. Why has it ended? The answer is because her iniquity is pardoned. And why is her iniquity pardoned?

Because she has received double for all her sins from the Lord's hand. Now double here means double pardon. It's not that Israel's had a specially difficult time and worked off the debt.

But that God has given her a double grace, a double pardon, overflowing kindness they don't deserve, which is exactly what God has done for us. This Advent, I want you to meditate on what God has done for you.

And what does it look like, the Lord says, this comfort when he comes to us? Turn over to verse 10. Look more at the gentleness of God. 10 and 11. Behold, the Lord God comes with might.

[19:56] His arm rules for him. Now this is full of tenderness. He's got this arm, doesn't need to lean on anything. He does it all, rescues us on his own. Keep reading. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd. And what else does he do with his arms? He gathers the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

This word for bosom, it means a curved out space. It's like if I take a child, little baby, and I wrap myself entirely around it. Closest thing to my heart I can, wrapping myself around it.

It's though God enfolds himself around us. It's such a gentle and tender picture. This is God. He tends his flock.

He feeds us. He feeds every single one of us. He gathers us in his arms and he carries us. He's patient with us knowing how wayward we are. He's gentle with us because he keeps us from harm. [20 : 59] That's why every verse in this hymn finishes, Rejoice, rejoice. It's so much to rejoice in because this is our God. He's not only great beyond comparison, he's gentle, tender beyond comparison.

The third thing this passage tells us about God is God's gift. His greatness, his gentleness, his gift. Because at the heart of the passage is the gift of God.

What God gives us is himself. He comes to us. We cannot understand this passage unless we can see that it's about God's long-term purpose and intention to be with us.

Just let me bounce through it again. Back to 40 verse 1. Comfort, comfort. My people. Says, you're God. We are his people.

He's made us. And we are his. We belong to him. Verse 3. He is our God. He belongs to us. Verse 8.

[22 : 03] Our God. Verse 9. Your God. You can call him your God. He is our God. And the astonishing thing is that God wants and delights and works to be with us.

Let's go back to verse 10 again. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him.

What is his reward? What is God's reward for doing all this work of salvation? It's us. It's his sheep. It's his flock. That's what he's working for. The flock is his reward.

It's hard to believe. He is our God. Not because we're committed to him, but because he is committed to us. You know, we're tempted to give up on God.

So foolish. But he never gives up on us. And you see, this is where the greatness and the gentleness and the gift of God come together in the person of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 07] You remember when we started in Matthew's Gospel, we read this. Mary will bear a son, the angel says. You'll call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. And then he says, this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. See, in the flesh of Jesus Christ, God makes a way for him to dwell with us and for us to dwell with him.

Just stay with me here. But to say that Jesus' name is Emmanuel is more than just God is with us, you know, the God of might and power.

It means that God's presence is with us in a way to destroy evil and sin, but without destroying us. To be with us means that he saves us from ourselves and saves us from our sin.

And that is the source of true comfort, that our iniquity is truly pardoned, that we have received double from the Lord's hand for all our sins, no punishment and his presence. We still struggle with sin.

[24 : 24] We still struggle with doubt and suffering and illness and death. We live in a world that still rejects God and his son. But Jesus is both Emmanuel and our saviour.

And at the birth of Jesus, the transcendent God became flesh for us in this one child. We seek God in the child Jesus Christ. And he deals with our sins in a way that is so great and so gentle.

And he gives himself to us in a way that nothing can ever separate us. And in the last book of the Bible, you remember, when we're allowed to see into heaven in the future, we hear a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with his people.

He will dwell with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. He'll wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things that pass away. Now, I think this sense is captured very lovingly in this hymn.

[25 : 37] So just turn back to the hymn on page 7. And I wonder, Terry, if you could help me out here for a moment. Have you ever noticed, let's just look at the first verse, that the first two lines are played in a minor key.

And there's a reason for that. So, Terry, just play the first two lines, will you? One more. One more. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Yeah. Thank you, Terry.

So both of these, the first lines, are written from the perspective of a believer in the Old Testament. The same with verse 2 and verse 3 and verse 5.

That's why they're in the minor key. But we have seen the greatness and the gentleness and the gift of God in Jesus Christ. But we still wait because he has promised he will come again to be with us.

[26 : 55] And that's why each verse finishes in this incredible rousing rejoice. Terry, if you just play the last line there. It's great, isn't it?

I mean, this perfectly reflects our Christian experience. Between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, we look back to see, we took our flesh and all these promises are partially fulfilled in him.

Some of them fully fulfilled. But we look forward to the day when the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. And now, in the sadness and in our longing and in our suffering and our sin, each day facing death and doubt, we rejoice because of the promise.

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Amen. Amen. Amen.