

O Come O Come Emmanuel

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[0 : 0 0] Oh, good evening, folks. It's so nice to see all your lovely faces here this evening. This is the... First, I'm Aaron. If you didn't meet me, my name's Aaron. I look after the service.

Come and say hi afterwards. So this is the first week of Advent, and Advent is not the countdown to Christmas. Advent is the beginning of the church year. It's the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, the beginning of the church year, and during this time, we try and do a couple of things. One of the things we try and do is... See, we're trying to enter the story of Christmas, and one of the ways we do that sounds a bit unusual, but one of the ways we do that, or a helpful way to do that, is to try and identify with Israel when they were a captive people, longing for the Messiah to come and rescue them. And we try and get into that headspace. So when Christmas comes, it's really joyful because Jesus turned up. Jesus came. It's fantastic. So that's one of the ways we try and do that. One of the other things we do is we remind ourselves to be expectant that Christ will return again. Christmas is very frenetic and materialistic, and Advent gives us this fresh start.

We create this space in our life. We carve out this time to allow ourselves to feel the need for a Savior and nourish this desire we have for Him to return.

So we have an Advent series for you. It's called Christ and the Carols. Here's what we're going to do. Each week, we're going to look at a famous Advent or Christmas carol, and we're going to study it a little bit because it's easy to sing this stuff quite sentimentally. You know, sort of like Joy to the world and Snoopy's Christmas become mushed together in the sort of medley of happiness for us, right?

So we're going to take a thoughtful look at a carol each week, looking at the theology of it, and then we're going to have a look at a Bible passage that relates to that carol. Okay, how's that sound? Does that sound all right? So that's what we're going to do each week.

[2 : 1 0] Okay. So this week, the classic carol, we're going to sing Advent carol, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and then we're going to look at Isaiah 40. So let's start with a hymn. All right, the hymn, written by Guy Cood, John Jason Neill, born early 1800s, London, stated at Cambridge. He was an Anglican priest. His big thing is that he did a lot of work with the poor. That was his kind of gig.

He was, as I said, he was an Anglican priest, but he had this kind of side hustle. He had this kind of side gig, and his side gig was translating ancient Latin and Greek texts. So one day he's looking through some 18th century manuscript, and there was this Latin poem in there that he really liked. And the best guess is that it was a Gregorian chant from about the 8th century. So he translated it, boom, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. That's how it started. So he started playing it in his ministry, first of all. That's where the whole thing was first sung. And he didn't have a church. He ran a poorhouse. So the first people to actually hear O Come, O Come, Emmanuel were orphans and women escaping the sex trade. So that's the guy behind the first Advent hymn.

Let's have a look at the hymn itself really quickly. If you have it in front of you, that might be helpful. So originally, seven verses. And the structure is quite simple. Each, the first line of each verse is a name of Jesus. So you see them, we just sung four verses tonight.

So you see the first one, the name of Jesus is after the O Come, O Come bit. It's Emmanuel. Emmanuel. And then another name of Jesus, wisdom. Another name of Jesus, day spring. Another name of Jesus, desire of nations. And these Bible verses that go with each of these that try and sort of unpack the truth of who Jesus was. So let's look at each verse really, really quickly. So O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. A lot of you will know what Emmanuel means. It means God with us. It's how the New Testament describes Jesus. But in this verse, we're thrown into the heads of the Israelites who live in captivity. So these Israelites, remember, have been taken over by this foreign nation a few thousand years ago. And they're praying, this God who has promised to be with us, please turn up. So that's that first little verse there. God, turn up. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. And then you see the word ransom there. And ransom means that we're acknowledging that this turning up and this rescuing of Israel, that there's going to be a cost to that. There's a ransom to be paid for that rescue. And then the next verse, we sing about Christ as wisdom on high. That's one of the names of Jesus. Jesus is called wisdom. This Messiah that we hope for, he's going to set all things right because he's the wisdom of God. And we're called to follow into that wisdom and live into that wisdom.

And then we sing about Christ, the day spring. That's a slightly tougher one. What's that one about? The day spring. It's kind of an old school word. I don't know if you get this. I get this sometimes. As I wake up at like two o'clock in the morning and I wake up anxious.

[5 : 31] I've had some weird dream or something. Or my head is perseverating over something I've got to do. And I can't go back to sleep because I'm just slightly freaking out at two o'clock in the morning and it's dark. And you're just longing for the morning. You just can't wait for the sun to get up because you know when the sun comes up, for some reason these sort of feelings disappear a little bit. It's a great feeling. That's what day spring, that's what that word means. So we sing Jesus, you're the day spring. We need you. We're in trouble.

You're like the sun breaking in in the morning and we know it's all going to be okay. And lastly, we sing, O come desire of nations. That's a reference to Haggai 2.7, which we don't have time to get into. It basically reminds us that this Messiah has come not just for Israel, but for all nations. So those are the four verses that we've sung tonight. But there's a refrain, rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Again, we're getting into this headspace of the Israelites who are desperate for rescue because they're being taken over. And they're praying for this Messiah to come and make all things right.

And so they're celebrating before it's happened whilst in the midst of a really tough situation. And the hymn helps us to understand that or get into that frame of mind with the tune. I don't know if you've ever thought about the music to it. It's quite sad. Like it's a sad song, but it's a joyful song. It's like, ba-na-na-na. Like it's sad, but then we sing rejoice, rejoice.

So it's this weird mix of sort of joyful but sad. And it's completely appropriate for Advent. And completely appropriate for where we are in the scheme of sort of salvation history. We should be joyful because Christ did turn up. The cross happens. We're forgiven. The life of God is inside of us through His Holy Spirit. The future is certain. But, so we're joyful for that. But death still steals people away. Disease makes us miserable. Loneliness is real. And anxiety is real. And the world is not peaceful, not even by the most generous margin. I love this hymn. It's a hymn for the real world. Joy, joy, joy, joy. We have Christ. And sorrow, because the redemption project isn't complete.

So, that's the hymn. It's a wonderful hymn. And I hope these few ideas are helpful next time we sing it.

[8 : 34] And you can sing it with gusto and understanding. And the scripture we've matched it to is Isaiah 40. So let's spend a bit more time on that. Again, it's probably helpful to have your Bibles open. It's quite a... There's a lot going on here.

I don't know if you know much about Isaiah, but it's... The structure of the whole book is really simple. It's basically two halves. 1 to 39, 40 to 66. 1 to 39 are about judgment. 39 chapters of judgment.

It's all about the judgment to come. God is telling the Hebrew people through Isaiah, God is saying to them, you're going to be taken into captivity as a consequence for your idolatry.

So, 39 chapters of that. And then, that actually comes true. Babylon sweeps into Jerusalem and destroys the temple, takes them captive. And that brings us to the end of chapter 39. And then you turn a page and it's all... It's something new. Now we're in that time of captivity.

Chapter 40 onwards, they're in... They've been taken over. And so what's God's word to them in chapter 40? It's not, I told you so. Let's have a look at it.

[9 : 57] It moves from judgment to these amazing promises. It's a chapter here of just these amazing promises. And God says to his people in captivity, he makes three really big promises. And the first word is comfort. You see it right there at the start. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. So that's what God says to Isaiah. Comfort my people. Speak nicely to them. Speak tenderly to them. Now that word comfort, God doesn't just say, say to them comfort. Comfort. Like it's like when I tell my kids, calm down.

Right? That doesn't... That doesn't make them calm. So just saying comfort doesn't calm them. God tells Isaiah to say comforting things to them. So what are those comforting things he says to them?

The first big one's in the end of verse 2. He says to the Israelites, tell them that they have received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Have received from the Lord's hand double for all your sins.

I know that doesn't sound very comforting. Right? That sounds like a bad thing. He says, are you going to give me double for all your sins? No, I'm good. I'll just take half or something. No. It's not a bad thing. It's a good thing. It's just lost a bit in translation of it.

[11 : 26] What does this mean? God is announcing Israel's sin has been pardoned. He's announcing forgiveness. This line, double for your sins, it's in the original Hebrew, which is the original language is Hebrew. It's a word picture. It's describing a piece of paper folded over exactly at the halfway point. So the bottom half is perfectly and completely covered by the top half.

It's a picture of forgiveness. As you know, one of the great disturbers of comfort is regret, shame, guilt. I'm going to assume many of you here are still carrying guilt and shame in your life for things that maybe sins you committed years ago. I'm just going to work on that assumption.

So I wonder if you could picture for a moment. You can close. You can do whatever you like. Just listen or close your eyes, whatever you like. But just imagine a piece of paper. Imagine a piece of paper. And imagine on the bottom half of that paper is that thing that shames you.

Just written out. It's written out. Now imagine that piece of paper being perfectly folded over so that the top half covers the bottom half where that sin, that shaming thing was written.

So when you look down now, you just see white. It's just white. It's perfectly covering your sin. The sin is gone. It's no longer held against you.

[13 : 02] This is what God has done for you. It's a picture that God told Isaiah to share with his people. After generations of idolatry, they're taken captive and God says, Ah, I want you to know you're forgiven.

After years of sin in your life and you're carrying the shame of it and you're carrying the guilt of it and you think, Surely I've just done too much. I've gone too far. I want you to know God says you're forgiven.

It's completely covered. Folks, there is no real hope or peace, deep comfort, unless you know you're right with God and God announces it here.

You're reconciled. And it's his work. He's done this. You can try and forgive yourself. It doesn't work. Forgiveness must come from the outside and speak into your heart.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, ransom captive Israel. Ransom. God has paid that ransom. He's paid that price with his own body.

[14 : 09] That's the first word. God says to his people in captivity, you're forgiven. The second announcement, the second comforting word is quite unusual.

It's verses 3 to 5 here. Listen to these. A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway. Each valley, every valley should be lifted up.

Each mountain hill be made low, uneven ground, level, a rough place is plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all the flesh shall see it together. What's that going on? It sounds like a construction project, doesn't it?

And that's what it's talking about. It's actually talking about a royal visit. Now today, when royalty comes or when really important people come to a thing, they kind of roll out the red carpet, literally, and people walk along on that red carpet, says something about the importance of these people.

This is the ancient extreme version of that. The king or queen is coming to visit, and they don't get to go just on any road. A special road is made for them.

[15 : 11] And that road will be straight and will go directly from where the royalty is to where you are, and so that it will plow through mountains. Nothing can get in the way of this brand new road.

It's flat and it's straight. What's it saying? It's saying that the Lord will arrive without fail. There will be no obstacles. The way is clear.

God will turn up. That's what it's conveying. And the Hebrew people, they got to experience this in a partial way, but we see it fully realized in Christ.

The Lord has made his way to us. The day's spring. It's happened. And he will return. And all we'll see is majesty.

We could jump back to the hymn for a moment here. O come, O come, Emmanuel. Now, originally in the Latin, as I said at the start, there were seven verses. Traditionally, people sing about four or five verses.

[16 : 13] There are actually seven verses. And here's the kicker. And this is going to sound a little bit Da Vinci Code, but stay with me, all right? Just stay with me on this. So, if you take the first letter, I know.

If you take the first letter of the names of Jesus, so after that, O come, O come, Emmanuel. O come, O come, day spring, wisdom, desire of nations, and the other ones.

If you take the first letter of the names after the O come, O come, but in the original Latin, it's an acronym. It's S-A-R-C-O-R-E.

If you read it from top to bottom, no, just bear with me this. Just. If you read it from bottom to top, it's an acrostic, a two-word acrostic, a Latin phrase, erocras, which means I will be with you tomorrow.

So, it's written purposely like this. Somebody, you know, nobody discovered this and thought it was cool. It was written like this. People were clever back in the days. It says, I will be with you tomorrow.

[17 : 25] I think that's beautiful. Friends, Jesus means God with us, right? Sorry, Emmanuel, God with us. It's coming back. That's what it's trying to tell us.

That's what the song is trying to elude in this kind of freaky kind of way. But very clearly, in Isaiah here, God is coming back. He has promised this.

And it will be awesome. He's coming back as certain as tomorrow is coming. And Isaiah follows up this kind of announcement of this big construction project, a sea in God coming, with this very honest look at the comparative glory of humanity.

And verses 6 to 8, that's the all grass withers part. And it's helpful to us because in case we're sort of thinking, thanks God that you're coming back, but I'm pretty sure we can work this out ourself.

We've got this under control. You know, we've passed a few laws. We need to get some good leaders. We just need some good structures in place and everything will be fine. No. To knock that kind of thinking on the head, we have verses 6 to 8.

[18 : 36] All flesh is grass and all its beauty is 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.

The grass withers, the flowers fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. What are you going to trust in here? I think it's what it's saying. Sort of in the sense, it's in a sense God is, or Isaiah, God is telling Isaiah to tell the people to get over themselves, you know.

Just get over yourself. Like you actually have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow, do you? And you have far less control of your life than you think you do. You will not have any lasting hope or comfort by digging deep into yourself.

Trust something outside of yourself. Trust something outside of your own personal capacity you think to have to make great decisions and eat well and have good goals, etc.

We'll come back to this idea at the end. So in summary so far, Isaiah is comforting his people. God has said to Isaiah, comfort your people. They're in trouble. They're in captivity.

[19 : 43] Tell them they're forgiven in the most beautiful picture you can imagine. Tell them they're forgiven. Then secondly, tell them that Jesus is coming back for sure. And that's a good thing because people, you can't handle this situation.

And thirdly, and lastly, the king who is coming back, Isaiah says, let me tell you something about this king. Verses 10 and 11. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his rewards is with him, his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a sheep and he will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

So you see the description of the king that's coming who will make all things right, who forgives us. When he returns, he's not messing around. He's got his guns. It means basically strength in action.

The king is going to roll up his sleeves. He's going to get on with making this world right. But in case that sounds like he's just this fierce, military, get things done, kind of judgy ruler guy, verse 11.

[20 : 50] He'll gather people up like lambs, like a shepherd. It's so lovely. This mighty king wants to gather us up like a shepherd who gathers up a vulnerable lamb.

He'll gather you up and he's going to hold on to you and he's going to hug you. Now I don't know what you think about that picture, whether you think it's a bit sappy or weird. I don't know what you think about it, but it's a picture carefully chosen by God.

I love it. I just think being in the arms of the shepherd king of the universe, that sounds like the safest and most happiest and most comforting place in the whole world, I think.

And that's the impression God is trying to give to us about what this will be like when Christ returns for us. Let me finish up here. So the words of this hymn and this scripture, they're outstanding promises.

Have a think about this comfort that God speaks to us. You are forgiven. It's great. You're forgiven. Even of that thing.

[21 : 57] Even that thing. You're forgiven. God is returning. He wants to make all things right.

And not only that, but he's going to gather up each of us individually and hold on to us like a shepherd. Goodness, that just sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

Think about how different these ideas are to worldly comfort. Think about how the comfort of God differs from worldly comfort.

What does worldly comfort look like? What is the best comfort just, you know, secular humanists can offer? People in your work can offer.

Your mates can offer. What does that comfort look like? It often just looks like nice feelings from nice words. I'll give you a few examples of some comforting phrases you may have heard before.

[22 : 54] You're stronger than you think. I have faith in you. I know you can get through this. There are plenty more fish in the sea.

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. They're like mini pep talks. They're morale boosters. And the problem with worldly comfort is that it's us focused.

It's comfort from within. It's our dreams. It's our hopes. It's us fantasizing about a better tomorrow that we make up and hope will come true.

Worldly comfort is based on the idea that if we take action, if we try hard enough, we can make ourselves feel better about whatever we're going through in life. Now, don't get me wrong.

Comforting words are not bad. They're not bad things. They're good. Worldly comfort does do some good. You know, dream big and have goals and say nice things to people.

[23 : 59] But in terms of reassuring us that our lives will be okay, in the end, that kind of comfort goes, it's about this deep, right? It goes about this deep. The comfort that God offers, my goodness, you're forgiven.

He's going to return. He's going to make all things right. This comfort goes so much deeper because real comfort is not a human endeavor.

Real hope is not a human endeavor. It is a God project. So let's enter Advent together and think on these things and find great hope in them.

And we need hope because we, in this God project of bringing us comfort and hope, the history of salvation, history, we're sort of muddled in it.

We're caught in the middle of it between the first and the second act, between Christ coming and Christ returning. We're right in the middle of this thing. And the great thing about Advent, this season of the church calendar, is it acknowledges that.

[25 : 03] It recognizes we're right in the middle of it and that's a hard place to be. So it says to us, look back, find hope that Christ came. Look forward in the promises that he will come again.

So this is Advent. This is the journey it takes us on. Let's get into it. Christ in the carols.
Amen.