

“O Rex Gentium: O King of the Peoples, and the Desire of all”

O Antiphons

In these last few days before Christmas we have been looking, at weekday Masses, at the seven Great ‘O’ Antiphons of Advent. From 17th to 23rd December every year, the Church sings these wonderful acclamations at Vespers – at Evening Prayer – and has done so since at least the sixth century, that is, for over 1,500 years.

Each of the ‘O’ Antiphons draws on one or more of the titles from the Old Testament attributed to the Messiah, and weaves a rich tapestry of imagery and symbolism to help us understand who the Messiah is, and what it is that He will do for us when at last He comes. Today’s ‘O’ Antiphon reads:

*‘O Rex Gentium: O King of the peoples, and Desired of all,
the corner stone who makes of all things one:*

O Come and save poor Man whom you fashioned out of clay.’

‘Poor Man whom you fashioned out of clay.’ It is one of the great ironies of our modern age that almost everyone celebrates Christmas. Even in households where there is no religion at all; even in households where another religion is observed, for example I have known Jewish families who have put up a tree and have exchanged presents on 25th December. Almost everyone is caught up in the excitement and the anticipation of the season’s festivities. And perhaps this is because, for all the paganism of many people’s celebrations, there remains a cultural echo of Christianity in our Western society. In today’s ‘O’ Antiphon we are reminded that we are all made of clay, that we have all, like Adam in the Garden of Eden, been fashioned from the dust of the earth and, as we shall be reminded on Ash Wednesday, to dust we shall all return. We have a common root, a common

beginning, and we shall all share a common end. And it is in this sense that the long-awaited Messiah is King of *all* the peoples. Whether or not we acknowledge Him to be our King, it is He, and He alone, who is the corner stone of our very existence, as St John tells us in the Prologue of his Gospel, ‘All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made’ (Jn 1:3).

Our common inheritance includes our damaged human nature and our tendency to sin. Each and every one of us commits sin. Each and every one of us is a sinner. And it is precisely this damaged and broken human nature that the Messiah – the King of all the peoples – has come to repair, to restore, and to raise up once more through the forgiveness of sins.

At Christmas, the Christ Child is laid in a wooden manger. On Good Friday He will be nailed to a wooden Cross. And on Good Friday, all sins will be forgiven. However, Christ forgiving us our sins is one thing; our receiving and benefitting from that forgiveness is another. Forgiveness is like a Christmas present. A gift may be given by being placed under the Christmas tree or in a Christmas stocking. But so long as the gift remains under the tree, it remains given but not yet received. To benefit from the gift we must receive it graciously, unwrap it, and put it to use, whatever it may be.

So it is with forgiveness. We have to receive the gift of forgiveness, but we can only do that by acknowledging our need of it by going to Confession. Then we have to unwrap that gift of forgiveness through our prayers and penances; put that gift of forgiveness to use, by making a firm purpose of amendment and promising to *try*, at least, not to commit those same sins again; and live a life of virtue instead. Only then will the gift of forgiveness bear fruit.

*The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compared with Christ the Apple Tree.*

We who are made from the dust of the earth can yet, through the falling down to earth of the Seed which is Christ Our Lord (Jn 12:24), bear much fruit in our souls if only we would allow that seed to grow, and blossom, and flourish.

This is the desire of all the peoples, even of those who do not yet recognize that this is what they truly desire: to be ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven.

On Christmas Day will be born the One who is ‘risen with healing in His wings,’ [to quote the Christmas carol (*Hark the Herald Angels Sing!*) and which in turn quotes the Old Testament prophet Micah 4:2.] We are all born of clay, but we can also be risen with Him having had our damaged and sinful nature healed by the balm of His mercy and the grace of His forgiveness.

None of us likes admitting we were wrong. None of us likes saying sorry. Most of us – even priests – have to psyche ourselves up to go to Confession, but there is no healing without it. And if we are to benefit from the gift that the newborn Christ bestows upon us at Christmas, then we do well to receive it graciously, unwrap it, and put it to full use.

O King of the peoples, and Desired of all, the corner stone who makes of all things one:

O Come and save poor Man whom you fashioned out of clay.