

Carol service 2021

During these last seven days I have been enjoying saying Evening Prayer using the Church of England Evening Prayer app. I say 'saying', but in fact this year the national church has provided Daily Prayer that has included singing and in these past seven days – joy of joys –that has included the traditional Advent antiphons, otherwise known as the Great Os, that begin with 'O Sapientia', O Wisdom, on 17 December and end with 'O Emmanuel' on the 23rd. There is reference to these antiphons in the great 6th century text of Boethius, 'The Consolation of Philosophy' so they are very ancient. The sequence of seven Os is addressed to Christ in titles derived from Scripture and they culminate in a prayer for his coming:

*O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other,
mightily and sweetly ordering all things:
Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

We still use 'O' as an exclamation of wonder or surprise, and that usage predates Latin. It is there in ancient languages including the Greek of the New Testament. 'O foolish Galatians', writes St Paul. St Luke says to his patron 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I wrote of all that Jesus did and taught'.

But in Greek there is not one O but two. There is the Great O, the O-Mega, that is not just an exclamation of wonder but is also a title claimed by the Christ of the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible:

I am the Alpha and the O, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

He is the O-Mega, the great O.

But there is another O in Greek, one we have become all too familiar with this past month, the Little O, O-Micron. This is o (short) rather than o (long).

As I have been praying the Great Os these past days I have of course been aware of the shadow on the Little O. And as I have been listening to the ancient plainsong setting of those Os, the beauty of their words and music has for me helped to banish the fear and darkness that have come in the path of our unwelcome viral guests. Almost just articulating the 'O' is enough for me, just that one letter, because it's a great letter, a wondrous letter. It puts the Little O and its niggling fears in its place and fills the imagination instead with hope and peace and joy.

We have sung a version of those Great Os in the hymn 'O come, O come, Emmanuel' and we will shortly be singing a whole lot more Os as well, in 'O come all ye faithful'. But we have also been reminded of the great mystery of Christmas, that the Great O established his true greatness by becoming small, and only by following him in that journey, by becoming small ourselves, can we ever aspire to greatness. So at this time we don't marvel at what the world thinks to be Great; we sing our O to the little town of Bethlehem, with the little child that wondrously entered the world within its bounds.