



## Advent 2016: The O Antiphons

# The O Antiphons: A soothing balm for traumas

Karen Eliassen

At the end of a year characterised by upheaval and distress, lifestyle gurus are advocating the Danish practice of *hygge* as the cure for whatever has ailed us in 2016. In a way, this kind of re-engagement with a disordered reality is what Advent is all about: 'In the darkness in Advent we imagine that a new child is coming, that a saviour is coming.' This act of imagination, to which the O Antiphons give voice, is prophetic and radical says Karen Eliassen as she introduces the ancient texts which are the subject of *Thinking Faith's* Advent reflections this year.

A recent article in *The Guardian*, by its fashion editor no less, offers an intelligently interesting commentary on a fad-phenomenon hitting the lifestyle consumer markets these days in full force. Strictly secular in mood and intent, the article nevertheless has a title and content in which the Christian reader can readily enough detect Advent concerns: 'Hygge – a soothing balm for the traumas of 2016'.<sup>1</sup> In one form or another, balm and trauma taken



together are the great Advent themes, just as they were the themes of the ancient Hebrew prophets in whom the Church's Advent texts are rooted. But *hygge*, a Danish word tricky to translate referring to an experience of serious cosiness (it does not partake of twee sentimentality) and low-key conviviality (nor does it partake of guffawing loudness), also shares an appreciation of softly-lit stillness – a kind of attractive midnight-ness – with the Advent season. It is no coincidence that although *hygge* for Danes is a year-round praxis, it is at Christmas time that its peak expression kicks in. That a fashion editor's article in a mainstream secular newspaper can offer rich pickings for engaging with the liturgical season of Advent should come as no surprise. The secular world is no less interested in perceiving the disordered (to use an Ignatian term) world for what it is and yearning deeply for something to change than the Church is.

But what might come as a surprise is the concluding take on *hygge* expressed in the very last sentence of *The Guardian's* article: '*Hygge* is more radical than you might think.' It suggests that there is more to *hygge* than sedation against an unpalatable dire reality, that at the core of *hygge* there lies a potential for an imaginative quickening with which to re-engage in a new way with that unpalatable reality.

And so too, of course, is Advent more radical than we might think, and at its core similarly beats an act of the imagination. The Advent liturgical readings powerfully remind us every year of the passions of the great Hebrew prophets, of the furore of their messianic desires and hopes – remind us that their passions and desires hold as true for us today as they did for Israel then. Isaiah excels in articulating the tension in Israel's experience of seesawing between balm and trauma – between God's [mercy](#) and God's justice. All of this – the complex and dynamic relationship between God and the recited story of Israel and us as listeners to that story; the lyricism and passion of the prophet Isaiah; and that yearning for radical change from dire realities that spans across all times and cultures – all of this contributes to the beautiful form and content of that most ancient of Advent texts, the O Antiphons.

Placing *hygge* and the O Antiphons alongside each other may seem forced. The association of *hygge* with anything radical may not sit well at all with anyone who takes ‘radical’ conscientiously. The kind of conversation that characterizes *hygge* does not allow for the heated sentiments and passionate voices of radical ideas, especially of the political kind. In the same way, we may feel that a proper Advent ought to be a reflective time of passive waiting, of low-volume, nonconflictual aesthetics rather than a time to express our heartfelt desires for radical change. Most of us can probably without much ado happily imagine ourselves succumbing with relief to the sensuous immediacies of such a censored Advent-*hygge*: lighting a candle or two, pouring a glass of something mulled, sinking with gentle appreciation into an old comfy chair, bantering sweet pleasantries with another’s dear presence ... and perhaps listening with half an ear to a CD of the O Antiphons (or more familiarly, the hymn based on the O Antiphons, ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel’) playing softly in the background.<sup>2</sup> From such a vantage point, the fundamental radicalness of the Hebrew prophets brought to us by the O Antiphons may be the very last thing on anyone’s mind. This is the danger of the Advent-*hygge*, sedation by the wistful atmosphere into forgetting, even if only momentarily, dire realities. But these texts are not meant to sedate us; they are meant to radicalise us, in the very noblest sense of that word, into something new in response to those dire realities. And that radicalisation starts in the imagination, the aspect of ourselves that Advent stillness is geared to cultivate quietly but steadily and patiently.

Old testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this hope-filled disposition towards imagining the seemingly impossible (hence the direness) but deeply desired radical change the *prophetic imagination*. He writes of this disposition: ‘The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation.’<sup>3</sup> So if instead of listening at home to the O Antiphons with half an ear, we were to take ourselves off to Vespers to listen with two whole ears and more to the [O Antiphons in their liturgical setting](#), we might find our own ‘futuring fantasy’ engaged (rather than sedated) as that prerequisite to ‘implementation’. In Vespers, one evening at a time, the seven O Antiphons each in turn respond (as antiphons functionally

do) to the Magnificat. We are expected to listen with Advent patience to the unfolding story of how God far away in heaven moves closer to us listeners here on earth and becomes ‘God with us’. Both space and time are stretched to their utmost in all directions in the account of how Wisdom somewhere in the universe starts out as God’s creative word and eventually finishes up as the saviour king Emmanuel whose birth in our own hearts, in our own prophetic imaginations that can begin to implement, we the listeners await every Advent. What that implementation might conceivably radically involve is laid out in black and white in the Magnificat: all is turned upside down. This is the promise that the O Antiphons respond to and imaginatively quicken into effect.

In describing this dynamic between heaven and earth, between creation then and there and us here and now, the O Antiphons textually and theologically take their cue from Isaiah. They steadfastly work their way through a series of brief but evocative references to ancient Israel’s history of kings and covenants and ideals. Optimism flares thrillingly high around kingship and a just society, but the reality of Israel’s story is far from so pretty. Kings are wicked, covenants are broken, Israel is wayward, and divine wrath and punishment abound. The story that Isaiah tells is a balm-and-trauma story writ large whose seeming contradiction between mercy and justice in the relationship between Yahweh and Israel fuels the whole messianic enterprise. All we have to do to recognise that pattern is look back to Egypt where an enslaved Israel cries out in a mix of pain and desire for something to change: ‘The Israelites were groaning under their bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God,’ in the immediate wake of which we read a dizzying series of verbs describing God’s response: God ‘heard ... remembered ... looked upon ... took notice’.<sup>4</sup> Can a deepest desire for God’s attention to us be more succinctly put, that he should engage with us in such an all-consuming way, and exactly so at that moment he actually seems the furthest away? For it is out of that attention that the messianic story, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, begins to manifest. God hears, and the rest, so to speak, is history as the story of Moses takes off. What is it about this cry that elicits such a riveted response from God? Israel has by this time been in bondage for a few centuries, and undoubtedly has cried out plenty of times before. But this time the cry is different, and I can imagine that the element making this particular

cry different to God so that he responds with such focused attention is akin to an Advent stillness in the heart of the crier – a stillness that waits and allows the prophetic imagination to take hold. In the grip of that imagination Israel cries out her desire for closeness to a God fully engaged with her in her dire reality – that is, her desire for a God who saves, for a God who gives life. I can imagine that Israel in Exodus 2 cries out something beginning with ‘O’ which is informed by themes of a just society uncannily like those of the O Antiphons. To cry out ‘O Emmanuel’ from the pit of our desires to be set free (as the last O Antiphon has it) is to choose life, new life, even as it appears that death is all around us.

If we are exhorted to do just that, choose life over death, in Advent, so is the Israel of Exodus. Moses at the end of his days reminds Israel of this crucial choice in his rousing sermon to the Israelites on the verge of entering the Promised Land: ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live – by loving the LORD your God, heeding his commands, and holding fast to him’.<sup>5</sup> It is not for nothing that the second antiphon, O Adonai, mentions Moses by name – it is the God of Moses who steps once more into the breach between life and death in Advent. Isaiah, to whom the O Antiphons are so heavily indebted, is the prophet who has by far the most to pronounce on this breach as he repeatedly makes use of both warrior imagery and birth imagery to relay God’s fundamental engagement with his people who are faced existentially with the choice between life and death. These two kinds of imagery are scattered liberally but separately throughout all of Isaiah, except for one unique appearance cheek and jowl in Isaiah 42 where the prophet combines God, cry, and life and death in one great and single but shocking mixed metaphor: ‘The LORD goes forth like a warrior, Like a fighter He whips up his rage. He yells, He roars aloud, He charges upon His enemies. I have kept silent far too long, Kept still and restrained Myself; Now I will scream like a woman in labour, I will pant and I will gasp.’<sup>6</sup>

Overwhelming divine energies are needed for the kind of radical change we so deeply desire, energies that border on chaos, energies that only God can fully release – the roars of a warrior and the screams of a birthing woman. Between the lines of the Isaiah-informed O Antiphons lies the imaginative bedrock of such energies that are fuelled directly by Life and Death. In the darkness in Advent we imagine that a new child is coming, that a saviour is coming. That is what the prophetic imagination hooks into in Advent as it imagines the near-impossible and chooses life in the most dire of realities. It is in fact, every Advent, a matter of life and death, or rather, of choosing life every time, which is why the season, like its secular and more trivial cousin *hygge*, is ‘more radical than you might think’.

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<sup>1</sup> Read the article on *hygge* by Jess Cartner-Morley at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/18/hygge-a-soothing-balm-for-the-traumas-of-2016>

<sup>2</sup> A beautiful modern setting of the O Antiphons, with a minimal solo flute accompaniment incorporating the familiar Advent hymn, can be heard at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4dCLJ\\_9a7Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4dCLJ_9a7Q) (It is an amateur clip which unfortunately does not identify the composer) Apart from the plainchant, the most familiar traditional version is probably that of M. A. Charpentier (late 17<sup>th</sup> C) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLABi7jRAZ0>.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1978), a stirring Old Testament theology classic itself written in lyrical prophetic style.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 2:23-25. All Old Testament quotes from The Jewish Publication Society’s *Tanakh*.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19-20

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 42:13-14