



## O Clavis David: O Key of David

Celebrated annually on December 19 in the Anglican Church's calendar, the [O Antiphon O Clavis David](#), meaning "O Key of David," proclaims God's appointed leadership of Christ Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes and promises given to the dynasty of King David.

### Traditional Antiphon

*O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open, and no one can shut; you shut, and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

### O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.*

This antiphon is based on at least two focal passages of Holy Scripture, though the theme of keys appears throughout Holy Scripture, as we will sample below.

## Isaiah's Giant Key

The first passage is found in [Isaiah 22:22-23](#):

*And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house.*

In the original context of Isaiah, the key powerfully symbolizes decisive authority and the power to carry out definitive decisions. These words were originally spoken to Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, the chief steward (or prime minister) entrusted with the leadership of Jerusalem under King Hezekiah in Isaiah's day. What's more, Hilkiah is God's replacement for Shebna, a "strong man" who will nevertheless be thrown by the Lord like a shot put discus into "a wide land" ([Isaiah 22:17-18](#)).

Again, the emphasis is on leadership—and leadership that honors God. J. Alec Motyer points out

*Everything then depends on how [Eliakim] sees himself and how he allows others to see him. It is not just that leadership position can become pride of position, national welfare be replaced by family interest, public good by nourishing a crowd of "hangers-on," but that the Lord as the object of trust can be replaced by a human object of trust.*

J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 178

As Isaiah makes clear in verses 22-23, quoted above, this key does not fit in one's pocket. This steward has "*on his shoulder* the key of the house of David." This is no ordinary house key! Keys in Isaiah's day could be wooden and very large. What a picture of the weightiness of authority and responsibility given to Eliakim by God!

## From the Hands of Eliakim to Christ Jesus

We look now from the lesser to the greater. The words of [Isaiah 22](#) are echoed and taken upon the lips of Christ himself in [Revelation 3:7](#):

*And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."*

[Revelation 3:7](#)

"Who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens." Eliakim's supreme authority is here taken up and transcended. The key of [Revelation 3:7](#) itself looks back and interlocks with another key already spoken of in [Revelation 1:18](#): "the keys of death and the

grave.” It is these keys that are in the nail-pierced yet risen hands of Jesus. Here, the words the Lord gave to Isaiah return to the Messiah himself. Just as Eliakim received supreme authority over the king’s affairs, so Jesus himself has complete authority over the household and kingdom of God. The One who is the Door also holds the Key.

As Anglicans proclaim in the Te Deum, it is Jesus himself who “overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers” (2019 Book of Common Prayer, pg. 18). He has flung wide “our heavenly home” and made “safe the way that leads on high.” Likewise, for all who take refuge in him, Jesus has definitively shut the door to the grave and hell—closing “the path of misery.” For believers, that door will never, ever open.

### **The Keys, the Kingdom & Spiritual Authority**

Of course, there are other instances of what appears to be this very same key of David in Holy Scripture. One thinks of Jesus’ words to Peter the Apostle (and, by extension, the rest of the Apostles):

*“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*

[Matthew 16:18-19](#)

Two reflections are in order here.

First: we see that the kingdom of heaven has keys. This means at least two things:

1. That entrance is granted, not assumed.
2. There *is* a key that fits the lock.

The key is Jesus himself. We need the right key to get into the kingdom of God, and in Jesus we have it. The kingdom of God is both more exclusive and more open than most would dare imagine. Any self-made “key” we forge for ourselves won’t fit the lock, but, praise God, we don’t have to.

Second, when we think about spiritual authority in the church today, the key phrase to focus on is “I will give you.” In other words, all genuine spiritual authority derives from Jesus himself. There is no other legitimate authority in the Church. To my mind, there is great Advent comfort and hope in dwelling upon the true and lasting Key of David. In a time when there is great angst and disappointment over spiritual leadership, we recall ourselves to Christ, God’s True Key.

In our meditation on and prayer of this verse from the ancient *hymn* “*Veni, Veni Emmanuel*,” we remember that Jesus reigns. All authority in heaven and on earth is his and ever shall be. In praying this verse, we invite our Lord to come again to his Church and make his supreme authority known in our lives. He opens, and he shuts. He is Lord. In this, we join with the cry of all the Faithful whose song continues to this very present hour:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*