

The Twelve Days of Christmas
Rev. Gary Magarrell December 13, 2009

Word's from today's Gospel reading:

“When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the King, behold wisemen from the East came saying, Where is he who was born King of the Jews? We have seen his star and have come to worship him.”

This is how Matthew introduces his story of the Epiphany, or the Manifestation or revelation of Christ to the gentiles. A story familiar to us all as the culmination of the Christmas story about the birth of Jesus.

I remember as a child January the 6th the feast of the Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas was the day that we always took down our Christmas tree and put away all the other decorations in the house. They had to stay up for the 12 days of Christmas.

How that tradition developed I have no idea except it was ingrained in me as symbolic. It was a tradition that I suppose was handed down in my family from generation to generation. There are many traditions lost of course in antiquity.

In England where William Shakespeare wrote his play 12th Night in 1610 many used it as an inspiration and de facto guide to ending their annual festival celebrations in the older, more traditional ways of Christmas.

The **Twelve Days of Christmas** is probably the most misunderstood part of the church year among Christians who are not part of liturgical church traditions.

Contrary to much popular belief, these are not the twelve days *before* Christmas, but in most of the Western Church are the twelve days from Christmas until the beginning of Epiphany on January 6.

There were the four weeks of Advent celebrated culminating in Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. However, the First Day of Christmas was always considered as December 26th and the 12th day therefore January 6th.

This morning I want to reflect upon the popular song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" Some of you may be familiar with the story of this Christmas Carol but I believe it is good for us to reflect upon again and enjoy its symbolism.

The date of the song's first performance is not known, though it was used in European and Scandinavian traditions as early as the 16th century. It is usually seen as simply a nonsense song for children. However, some have suggested that it is a song of Christian instruction dating to the 16th century religious wars in England, with hidden references to the basic teachings of the Faith.

They contend that it was a memory aid to teach the catechism to youngsters.

The "true love" mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God.

The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptized person who is part of the Christian Faith.

Each of the "days" represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn.

However, many have questioned the historical accuracy of this origin of the song The 12 Days of Christmas. There is little "hard" evidence available either way. Some church historians affirm this account as basically accurate, while others point out apparent historical discrepancies. However, the "evidence" on both sides is mostly in logical deduction and probabilities. However, this uncertainty should not prevent us from using the song in celebration of Christmas and Epiphany

On the 1st day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

A Partridge in a Pear Tree

The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, whose birthday we celebrate on December 25.

It is interesting that one of my neighbours in a previous city had her Christmas tree decorated with partridges and pears and told me she likes the way they look. The same lady told me she did not believe in Jesus but enjoys the Christmas festivities. She would be surprised if I revealed to her that her Christmas tree was more religious than mine with symbols of our Jesus Christ on every branch.

In the song the 12 Days of Christmas, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge that feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, recalling the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered you under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but you would not have it so." (Luke 13:34)

On the 2nd day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Two Turtle Doves

These represent the Old and New Testaments, which together bear witness to God's self-revelation in history and the creation of a people to tell the Story of God to the world.

On the 3rd day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Three French Hens

The Three Theological Virtues: 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Love (1 Corinthians 13:13)

On the 4th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Four Calling Birds

The Four Gospels: 1) Matthew, 2) Mark, 3) Luke, and 4) John, which proclaim the Good News of God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus Christ.

On the 5th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Five Gold Rings

The first Five Books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah or the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which gives the history of humanity's sinful failure and God's response of grace in the creation of a people to be a light to the world.

On the 6th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Six Geese A-laying

The six days of creation that confesses God as Creator and Sustainer of the world (Genesis 1).

On the 7th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Seven Swans A-Swimming

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Inward Strength, Knowledge, True Godliness and Holy Fear (Reverence & True Religion)

(Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

On the 8th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Eight Maids A-Milking

The eight Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

1) Blessed are the poor in spirit, 2) Blessed are those who mourn, 3) Blessed are the meek, 4) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, 5) Blessed are the merciful, 6) Blessed are the pure in heart, 7) Blessed are the peacemakers, 8) Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matthew 5:3-10)

On the 9th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Nine Ladies Dancing

The nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit: 1) love, 2) joy, 3) peace, 4) patience, 5) kindness, 6) generosity, 7) faithfulness, 8) gentleness, and 9) self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

On the 10th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Ten Lords A-Leaping

The ten commandments: 1) You shall have no other gods before me; 2) Do not make an idol; 3) Do not take God's name in vain; 4) Remember the Sabbath Day; 5) Honor your father and mother; 6) Do not murder; 7) Do not commit adultery; 8) Do not steal; 9) Do not bear false witness; 10) Do not covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

On the 11th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Eleven Pipers Piping

The eleven Faithful Apostles: 1) Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James. (Luke 6:14-16). The list does not include the twelfth disciple, Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders and the Romans.

On the 12th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...

Twelve Drummers Drumming

The twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed: 1) I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. 2) I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. 3) He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. 4) He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell [the grave]. 5) On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. 6) He will come again to judge the living and the dead. 7) I believe in the Holy Spirit, 8) the holy Catholic Church, 9) the communion of saints, 10) the forgiveness of sins, 11) the resurrection of the body, 12) and life everlasting.

This is what Christmas is about. A time of joy, excitement, laughter, praise, singing and the retelling of the story of the blessed birth of God's son Jesus Christ our Lord.