

The twelve days of Christmas

Reverend Rob Lamerton

28 December 2003, Christmas 1

1 Samuel 2: 18-20, 26; Ps 148; Col 3: 12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Happy Christmas!

The twelve days of Christmas continue until January 5th. January 6th, Epiphany, was originally the major celebration when it celebrated the baptism of Jesus and also his birth. With Easter and Pentecost Epiphany was one of the three major festivals in the Eastern (Orthodox) tradition.

The earliest mention of Christmas on December 25th was in 336 in the Roman calendar. Later, in the 4th century, Epiphany became connected with Christmas after it had been introduced from the Eastern Church.

Some of the Eastern Churches still hold to the 6th January as the observance of the nativity. In the Armenian church the 6th of January is still celebrated as Christmas Day.

Within the 12 Days of Christmas we have:

on 26 December: St Stephen deacon and martyr

on 27 December: St John apostle and evangelist

on 28 December: Holy Innocents—the children killed by Herod. I use it to remember the many who are lost through abortion, child abuse, war, infant mortality etc...

on January 1st The Naming and Circumcision of The Lord.

But the 12 days of teaching appear to have become a time of teaching via the song.

From the Kenny King site we have this explanation:

In the church "Christmas" refers to a twelve day period that starts with Christmas day. This is where "The Twelve Days of Christmas" comes from. The world celebrates Christmas for twelve hours, but the Church celebrates it for twelve days because the gift of Christ is with us for twelve months of the year.

"The 12 Days of Christmas"—the song

When most people hear of "The 12 days of Christmas" they think of the song.

This song had its origins as a teaching tool to instruct young people in the meaning and content of the Christian faith.

From 1558 to 1829 Roman Catholics in England were not able to practice their faith openly so they had to find other ways to pass on their beliefs. The song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is one example of how they did it.

"The 12 Days of Christmas" is in a sense an allegory. Each of the items in the song represents something of religious significance. The hidden meaning of each gift was designed to help young Christians learn their faith.

The song goes, "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me..."

The "true love" represents God and the "me" who receives these presents is the Christian.

The "partridge in a pear tree" was Jesus Christ who died on a tree as a gift from God.

The "two turtle doves" were the Old and New Testaments—another gift from God.

The "three French hens" were faith hope and love—the three gifts of the Spirit that abide(I Corinthians 13).

The "four calling birds" were the four Gospels which sing the song of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The "five golden rings" were the first five books of the Bible also called the "Books of Moses."

The "six geese a-laying" were the six days of creation.

The "seven swans a swimming" were "seven gifts of the Holy Spirit."

(1Corinthians 12:8-11, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4:10-11)

The "eight maids a milking" were the eight beatitudes.

The "nine ladies dancing" were nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.(Galatians 5:22-23)

The "ten lords a-leaping" were the Ten Commandments.

The "eleven pipers piping" were the eleven faithful disciples.

The "twelve drummers drumming" were the twelve points of the Apostles' Creed.

and from the "St Luke" Pelican Commentary by G. B. Caird pp 65 and 66:

"Prophetic voices have spoken over the infant Jesus their messages of hope and foreboding, but he himself has yet to grow into awareness of that which God has in store for him. In the days of his maturity he was to display remarkable capacities of mind and spirit, but they came to him gradually, by the normal processes of development, under the influence of home, school, and synagogue. His teaching reveals to us a mind deeply appreciative of nature, scripture, and the common life of ordinary folk; all three must have made their impact on him during his formative years. Wherever he looked he saw that which spoke to him of God, and his growing understanding of God showed itself in a gracious and attractive personality.

To illustrate the thirty years of growth which led to the climax of his baptism, Luke records but one incident. At the age of twelve a Jewish boy became bar mitzvah, a son of the Law, able to accept for himself the responsibilities and obligations to which his parents had committed him by the rite of circumcision. For Jesus this occasion was celebrated by a family visit to Jerusalem for the Passover.

When the seven day festival was over, his parents started for home along with a caravan of other Galilean pilgrims, not realizing that Jesus was left behind. The great city had laid its charm upon him, and he was taking advantage of his opportunities to learn from the rabbis in the temple courts, so utterly engrossed in the exciting new world of intellectual adventure as to be oblivious to the consternation lie was causing.

To Mary's mild rebuke he replied in words of profound significance for our understanding of his later career. His parents should have known where to look for him in his Father's house.

This description of the temple betokens [symbolizes] that the doctrine of the divine fatherhood, long a tenet of Israel's faith, had become for him an intimate personal experience.

Besides becoming a bar mitzvah he had become intensely aware of being Son of God, and henceforth he was to live his life not merely under the Law but under the higher authority of his filial consciousness. Luke's Gospel is more than the story of what Jesus did and taught: it is also the story of what Jesus knew He was, as the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, 'the pioneer of our salvation', blazing a new trail for others to follow. It was his calling to explore to the uttermost what it means to call God 'Father'.

As this story points out, Jesus grew into his awareness of who he was and of his vocation. It can only remind us that we too will grow into our understanding of God's calling for us as we search out God's way for us.