

Sunday 26th November 2023 10.00 am combined service

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell Presbyterian Church



LECTIONARY READINGS:

Micah 5:2-5a

**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of
Judah,
out of you will come for me**

**one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”**

**3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labour
bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.**

**4 He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his
God.**

**And they will live securely, for then his
greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.**

**5 And he will be our peace
when the Assyrians invade our land
and march through our fortresses.**

**We will raise against them seven shepherds,
even eight commanders,**

Luke 1:39-45

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

INTRODUCTION

This morning I should like to vary my approach to preaching from exposition, and instead look at a popular Christmas song, which has come to us down through the centuries and apparently has a hidden Christian teaching.

You're all familiar with the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" I think.

There are twelve verses, each describing a gift given by "my true love" on one of the twelve days of Christmas.

On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me:

A partridge in a pear tree

On the second day of Christmas my true love sent to me:

**Two turtle doves,
And a partridge in a pear tree.**

On the third day of Christmas my true love sent to me:

**Three French hens,
Two turtle doves,
And a partridge in a pear tree.**

And the subsequent verses follow the same pattern. Each verse deals with the next day of Christmastide, adding one new gift and then repeating all the earlier gifts, so that each verse is one line longer than its predecessor.

- **four calling birds**
- **five gold rings**
- **six geese a-laying**
- **seven swans a-swimming**
- **eight maids a-milking**
- **nine ladies dancing**
- **ten lords a-leaping**
- **eleven pipers piping**
- **twelve drummers drumming**

To most it's a delightful nonsense rhyme set to music.

But it is thought to have had a quite serious purpose when it was written. It is a good deal more than just a repetitious melody with pretty phrases and a list of strange gifts.

What we do know is that the twelve days of Christmas in the song are the twelve days between the birth of Christ (Christmas, December 25) and the coming of the Magi (Epiphany, January 6).

Although the specific origins of the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" are not known, it possibly began as a Twelfth Night "memory-and-forfeits" game:

- in which the leader recited a verse,
- each of the players repeated the verse,
- the leader added another verse,

- and so on until one of the players made a mistake,
- with the player who erred having to pay a penalty,
- such as an offering up a kiss or a sweet.

This is how the song was presented in its earliest known printed version, in the **1780 children's book *Mirth Without Mischief***. (The song is apparently much older than this printed version, but we do not currently know how much older.)

You may be interested to know textual evidence indicates that the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was not English in origin, but French.

Three French versions of the song are known, and items mentioned in the song itself especially the partridge, for example, which was not introduced to England from France until the late 1770s, are indicative of a French origin.

It is also possible that “The Twelve Days of Christmas” has been confused with (or is a transformation of) a song called “A New Dial”

- (also known as “In Those Twelve Days”),
- which dates to at least 1625
- and assigns religious meanings to each of the twelve days of Christmas

In a manner somewhat similar to the memory-and-forfeits performance of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” the song “A New Dial” was recited in a question-and-answer format:

1. What are they that are but one?

We have one God alone in heaven above sits on His throne.

2. What are they which are but two?

Two testaments, the old and new, we do acknowledge to be true.

3. What are they which are but three?

Three persons in the Trinity which make one
God in unity.

4. What are they which are but four?

Four sweet Evangelists there are, Christ's birth,
life, death which do declare.

5. What are they which are but five?

Five senses, like five kings, maintain in every
man a several reign.

6. What are they which are but six?

Six days to labour is not wrong, for God himself
did work so long.

7. What are they which are but seven?

Seven liberal arts hath God sent down with
divine skill, man's soul to crown.

(Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Music, Geometry, Arithmetic, and Astronomy)

8. What are they which are but eight?

Eight Beatitudes are there given use them right and go to heaven.

9. What are they which are but nine?

Nine muses, like the heaven's nine spheres, with sacred tunes entice our ears.

(Who are the Muses and what are their roles?

Who are the muses and what are their roles?

The nine muses and their roles are: Urania - astronomy, Polyhymnia - hymns, Melpomene - tragic theatre, Thalia - comedic theatre, Clio - history, Calliope - epic poetry, Euterpe - song and elegiac poetry, Terpsichore - dance, and Erato - lyrical poetry)

10. What are they which are but ten?

Ten statutes God to Moses gave which, kept or broke, do spill or save.

11. What are they which are but eleven?

Eleven thousand virgins did partake and suffered death for Jesus' sake.

(The back story here is about a Christian lady called Ursula. Now unfortunately, Ursula and her travel companions – said to be anywhere between 11 and 11,000 virgin maidens – found themselves in the city of Cologne in Germany, where they were cruelly massacred for refusing to copulate with or marry the invading Huns, a nomadic race from Central Asia who conquered much of Europe)

12. What are they which are but twelve?

Twelve are attending on God's son; Twelve make our creed. The Dial's done.

The Dial I presume is the dial of a clockface.

So, it is also possible that “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was confused with ... or is a transformation of ... a song called “A New Dial”

But let’s look more closely at the Twelve days of Christmas.

Well, I am sure, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is what most people take it to be: a secular song that celebrates the Christmas season with imagery of gifts and dancing and music.

But here is a widely held understanding of the hidden meaning behind “The Twelve Days of Christmas”.

You may not realise that Catholic Christians in England during the period 1558 to 1829, when Parliament finally emancipated Catholics Christians in England, were prohibited from any

practice of their faith by law – private or public. It was a crime to be a Catholic Christian.

“The Twelve Days of Christmas” it is said was written in England as one of the “catechism songs” to help young Catholic Christians learn the tenets of their faith – a memory aid, when to be caught with anything in writing indicating adherence to the Catholic Christian faith could get you imprisoned or worse.

The songs ... **gifts** are hidden meanings to the teachings of the faith. The “**true love**” ... mentioned in the song ... doesn’t refer to an earthly suitor but refers to God.

The “**me**” who receives the presents refers to every baptized person.

The **partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ**, the Son of God.

In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge which feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, much in memory of the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem:

“Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered thee under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but thou wouldst not have it so...”

The other symbols mean the following:

2 Turtle Doves = The Old and New Testaments

3 French Hens = Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues

4 Calling Birds = the Four Gospels and/or the Four Evangelists

5 Golden Rings = The first Five Books of the Old Testament, the “Pentateuch”, which gives the

history of man's fall from grace.

6 Geese A-laying = the six days of creation

7 Swans A-swimming = the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven sacraments

8 Maids A-milking = the eight beatitudes

9 Ladies Dancing = the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit

10 Lords A-leaping = the ten commandments

11 Pipers Piping = the eleven faithful apostles

12 Drummers Drumming = the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed

So, as we reflect on the historical event of God entering human history through the humble birth of Christ, we note the huge variety of ways this has been celebrated ... down through the years

... in song, word, drama, and worship. Have a wonderful Christmas!

Amen.