

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" by WindWalker

The above song to most people is just a nonsense rhyme set to music. But it is more than just a repetitious melody and had quite a serious purpose when it was written. Roman Catholics in England during the period 1558 to 1829 were prohibited from any practice of their faith by law in private or in public. It was in fact a crime to be a Roman Catholic.

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written in England as one of the "Catechism Songs" to help secret young Roman Catholics learn the tenets of their faith. The poem was a memory aid for those unenlightened times when to be caught with anything in writing indicating adherence to the Roman Catholic faith could not only get you transported to a nasty place such as America, but also imprisoned, beheaded or hanged.

The song's gifts are hidden meanings to the teachings of the faith. The "true love" mentioned in the song doesn't refer to an earthly suitor, it refers to God. The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptised person. The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ and the two turtle doves are the old and new Testaments.

The other verses represent the following:

- 3 French Hens are Faith, Hope and Charity,
- 4 Calling Bird are The Four Gospels,
- 5 Golden Rings are the first five books of the Old Testament,
- 6 Geese A-Laying are the six days of creation,
- 7 Swans A-Swimming are the seven gifts of The Holy Spirit,
- 8 Maids A-Milking are the eight beatitudes,
- 9 Ladies Dancing are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit,
- 10 Lords A-Leaping are the Ten Commandments,
- 11 Pipers Piping are the eleven faithful apostles,
- 12 Drummers Drumming are the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed.

The Twelve days of Christmas start the day after Christmas Day, and end twelve days later on the 6th January with the Feast of Epiphany. Epiphany being from the Greek word for "manifestation" it being both a celebration of the Christ's Baptism (later reduced by the Church authorities to the solemn blessing of the Baptismal water) and of the revelation to the Three Wise Men, or Kings, or Magi.

Shakespeare's play "Twelfth Night" makes the old reckoning of dates clear and also of the belief that the Christmas decorations should come down, and the tree removed from the house, twelve days after Christmas Day. Many Roman Catholic and high Anglican Churches in the UK would not sing Christmas Carols before Christmas Day. Even the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols Service was not held before the Sunday after Christmas Day. It was also normal when I was a child in the 1940s for all the family to help put up the decorations on Christmas Eve and sing all but the last verse (reserved for Christmas Day) of "The Holly and the Ivy" as we worked. This jolly time would end with Evening Prayers after which we children would hang one of our socks (usually the largest we could find) by an unlit fireplace and go to bed very tired for it was by then much later than our usual bedtime. On these occasions "The Holly and the Ivy" was called a Carol but was a lesson for us on how the ancient heathen religions of our country were replaced by Christian worship.