

The Meaning of the 12 Days of Christmas

People often think of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' as the days preceding the festival. Actually, Christmas is a season of the Christian Year that lasts for the twelve days beginning December 25 and lasting until January 6 - the Day of Epiphany, when the church celebrates the revelation of Christ as the Light of the world and recalls the journey of the magi.

Concerning the popular song 'the Twelve Days of Christmas,' a couple of years ago, I learned the story behind the text from an article in the newsletter of the Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Montgomery.

From 1558 until 1829 Roman Catholics in England were not allowed to practice their faith openly. During that era someone wrote 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' as a kind of secret catechism that could be sung in public without the risk of persecution. The song has two levels of interpretation: the surface meaning plus a hidden meaning known only to members of the church. Each element in the carol is a code word for a religious reality.

- 1) The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ.
- 2) The two turtledoves are the Old and New Testaments.
- 3) Three French hens stand for faith, hope and love.
- 4) The four calling birds are the four Gospels
- 5) The five gold rings recall the Torah (Law) the first five book of the Old Testament
- 6) The six geese a-laying stand for the six days of creation.
- 7) Seven swans a-swimming represent the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit.
- 8) The eight maids a-milking are the eight beatitudes.
- 9) Nine ladies dancing? These are the nine fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5).
- 10) The ten lords a-leaping are the Ten Commandments.
- 11) Eleven pipers piping stand for the eleven faithful disciples.
- 12) Twelve drummers drumming symbolize the 12 points of belief in the Apostles' Creed.