

So Great a Salvation: The History of God's People in the World

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" (December 11, 2005)

The Calendar: Through Christ, time is reclaimed for man. One of the purposes of stars (Gen. 1:14-15) is to mark out specific seasons (the word means "religious feasts" Lev. 23:2,4). Israel's year was marked by three major feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). In addition there were the weekly Sabbaths, monthly new moon festivals, and other feasts and celebrations that were added in the history of Israel (Purim and Hanukkah, eg.). These feasts gave a rhythm to the year, that molded the identity of the Israelites. The same is true of the Church. When we follow the Church calendar, we are not merely being *instructed* about the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we are also being molded into a people for whom these events are the foundation stones for all life and history. We become more self-consciously Christian, a people defined and shaped by the work of Jesus Christ.

We are always molded by the calendars we keep. We think the Christmas season lasts from Thanksgiving through December 25. We think this because the calendar adopted by the modern world revolves around commerce and nationalism. The rhythm of our modern calendar is not the rhythm set by the Church.

The Twelve Days: The Church long ago established Advent as the time of preparation for Christmas. Advent ends at sundown, December 24, then Christmas begins. Christmas lasts not just one day but twelve full days. These twelve days are important because they give us a way of reflecting on what the Incarnation means. The first record we have of the twelve days being recognized as a Christian festival is found in the Church father, Ephraem Syrus, at the end of the fourth century. It was later officially declared to be a sacred season by the Council of Tours in 567. During the Middle Ages this period was one of continuous feasting and merrymaking, which climaxed on Twelfth Night, the traditional end of the Christmas season.

The Christmas season begins with the feast of the Nativity (December 25) and includes four more feast days before closing with the feast of Epiphany (December 26, the feast of St. Stephen; December 27, the feast of St. John the Evangelist; December 28, the feast of the Holy Innocents; January 1, the feast of Christ's circumcision). Finally, on the "Twelfth Night," January 5, the last celebration of Christmas takes place. In time, the twelve days of Christmas was perverted and abused by unbelievers. For many, Christmas became a time of great wickedness (which is one of the reasons the Puritans were so vehemently against the celebration).

On Epiphany (January 6), the celebration of Christmas comes to an end. Epiphany commemorates the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel—Christ's manifestation to the nations (as shown particularly in three different events: the visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the turning of water into wine). Epiphany sends us into the world to live out the Incarnation, to witness to the light of Christ in the darkness.

The Song: The song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* was used in European and Scandinavian traditions as early as the 16th century. It is usually seen as simply a nonsense song for children, but some have suggested the song served as a sort of catechism to teach children the basics of the Christian faith. The "true love" referred to refers to God Himself and the "me" who receives all the presents from the "true love" refers to the Church. The fact that each day the true love repeats his gifts and adds to them, point to the outrageous grace of God who gives exceedingly, abundantly above all that we can ask or think.

1st Day: A Partridge in a Pear Tree – Jesus the Christ, the Son of God

2nd Day: Two Turtle Doves – The Old and New Testaments,

3rd Day: Three French Hens – 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Love. Others think this refers to the Trinity.

4th Day: Four Calling Birds – The Four Gospels

5th Day: Five Gold Rings – The first Five Books of the Old Testament.

6th Day: Six Geese A-laying – The six days of creation.

7th Day: Seven Swans A-swimming – The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-11).

8th Day: Eight Maids A-milking – The Beatitudes

9th Day: Nine Ladies Dancing – The nine fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

10th Day: Ten Lords A-leaping: The Ten Commandments.

11th Day: Eleven Pipers Piping: The eleven faithful apostles

12th Day: Twelve Drummers Drumming: The twelve doctrines summarized in the Apostles' Creed.

It may be that the "five gold rings" refer not to jewelry but to golden ring-necked pheasants. If this is so that means that the first seven gifts are all birds (the ancient symbol of the Spirit) and the last five gifts are all human beings full of life and joyous activity. By the work of God's Spirit, men have been brought alive and given great joy.