

On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me; eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing... (I shan't read them all) ... two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree, and many more gifts besides. The much-loved song of the Twelve days of Christmas dates back almost 300 years, and the numbers of gifts each day have been appropriated for most of that time as a type of Catholic catechism. Helping us, dear brothers and sisters, to remember all that God has given to you and to me.

My True Love and yours is God the Father, who gave us his Son, Jesus Christ. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. That supreme gift of a Saviour is given on each of the twelve days of Christmas, recalled by the partridge in a pear tree; also recalled by the first reading: *from eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist*; a Saviour recalled by the creed; *begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father*. Following the day of the nativity, the frenetic gift-giving of the twelve days sings of two testaments, old and new. Three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Four gospels; five books of the Pentateuch; six days of creation. We can imagine *seven swans a-swimming* near the Bishop's Palace in Wells signifying the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit. Eight beatitudes, nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, and ten commandments. And today, on the eleventh day of Christmas our True Love gave to us, in addition, eleven pipers piping, representing the eleven faithful apostles. We are an apostolic Church.

We say in the creed each Sunday (even on this eleventh day of Christmas) that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic – the four marks of the Church, like four calling birds calling us to communion. *Apostolic* suggests calling and continuity. The apostle to the gentiles, St Paul, speaks of both in the second reading. Calling: *he chose us in him before the foundation of the world... that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you*; and continuity: to know *the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*.

We sing of a partridge in a pear tree; but St Paul sings; *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*. The True Love so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, *Jesus Christ, true God and true Man*. The partridge in the pear tree also represents Jesus because that bird is willing to sacrifice its life if necessary to protect its young by feigning injury to draw away predators. The song could have been a pelican in a pear tree, because the pelican feeds the family with its own flesh and blood, as does Jesus Christ to this day at Mass. But partridge scans better with the melody.

St John told us the beginning of His fourth gospel this morning. The name John means *God's gift*. And the beginning of his gospel celebrates the manifest gift of the word becoming flesh. A reading that used to be heard at the end of every Mass in the last gospel; still heard in every Mass of the extraordinary form of the Roman rite to this day: still read at Christmas morning Mass to this day: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*.

Dear brothers and sisters, as the season of Christmas continues, we count our blessings, we marvel at the best gift haul of all that is found in the fulness of faith, in the Church of Jesus Christ. *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

I think our offertory hymn speaks to our continued delight in God's gift to the world at Christmas. It speaks to our gospel, first and last and only. It speaks of our Alpha and Omega.

*Of the Father's heart begotten,
ere the world from chaos rose,
he is Alpha, from that Fountain
all that is and has been flows;
he is Omega, of all things,
yet to come the mystic Close,
evermore and evermore.*

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me: twelve drummers drumming. Or: the twelve points of doctrine contained in the Apostles' creed. On your leaflet, that ancient text has been divided into twelve articles that were once thought to have been written, one per apostle, following the day of Pentecost. On the twelfth day and night of Christmas, tomorrow, let us pray these words once again, thankful for the gift of faith, handed down by faithful apostles. Then on Epiphany Tuesday, a holy day of obligation, the tone changes from receiving to giving gifts. All the nations bringing three gifts of time, treasure and talent, so that in all things, God may be glorified.

Let us stand to enjoy the gift of the twelfth day a day early by reciting together the Apostle's creed:

- 1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,**
- 2. and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,**
- 3. who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,**
- 4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried;**
- 5. He descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead;**
- 6. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;**
- 7. from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.**
- 8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,**
- 9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,**
- 10. the forgiveness of sins,**
- 11. the resurrection of the body,**
- 12. and life everlasting. Amen.**