

Views from the Pews: The twelve days of Christmas

The secular world celebrates the Christmas season as a commercial bonanza at least two or three months long, ending on Christmas day. By stark contrast, the ancient tradition of the Church marks the season as the twelve days starting with the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day, and ending by celebrating the arrival of the Magi at the Epiphany on January 6th. The best-known song about the twelve days is a traditional Christmas carol whose words were first published in England in 1770. It is a cumulative song, meaning that each verse is built on top of the previous verses. The twelve verses describe a series of gifts given by "my true love" on the twelve successive days of Christmas. Of the many variants known since then, the current one goes back to Frederic Austin's version of 1909.

The lyrics probably started as a children's memory and forfeit game, in which participants were required to add a new verse and repeat all the previous verses correctly, or pay a forfeit for each mistake. The words originally had secular meanings, but at some unknown date a version emerged that turned it into an effective mnemonic to help pre-literate people remember the twelve most important points of Christian theology.

The first verse begins with "On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me'naming the first gift, a partridge in a pear tree. The partridge stands for the baby Jesus. The second and subsequent days add a new gift, as follows. The two turtle doves stand for the Old and New Testaments; the three French hens stand for faith, hope and love; the four calling birds stand for the four Gospels; the five gold rings stand for the Pentateuch; the six geese a-laying stand for the six days of Creation; the seven swans a-swimming stand for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; the eight maids a-milking stand for the eight Beatitudes; the nine ladies dancing stand for the fruits of the Holy Spirit; the ten lords

a-leaping stand for the Ten Commandments; the eleven pipers piping stand for the eleven faithful apostles; and the twelve drummers drumming stand for the statements of belief in the Apostles Creed. There is also a Māori version, titled "A Pukeko in a Ponga Tree", written by Kingi Matutaera Ihaka, which appeared as a picture book and cassette recording in 1981.

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