

ADDRESS 27 December 2015

Sunday after Christmas

Just as he did last year, the rector has invited me to preach on the Sunday after Christmas, probably thinking there'll be very few here for me to infect with heresy. Thank you for coming to continue our Christmas celebrations.

For many people, Christmas day is the end of a long period of stress, of exhausting shopping, of end-of-year parties, of wrapping gifts and writing cards and standing in the queue at the local post office. You hear people say *Thank God it's Christmas*, meaning, sadly, *Thank God it's over*.

But, for Christians, Christmas Day is not the end, it is a new beginning; for centuries, Christmas Day marks the first day of 12 days of celebration of the new life in Christ. The second day of Christmas is St Stephen's Day, commemorating the first Christian martyr; the third day of Christmas is St John's Day, commemorating the evangelist who is credited with writing five of the 26 books of the New Testament; the fourth day of Christmas is the Feast of The Holy Innocents, the children who paid the price of being born in the same place as Jesus at about the same time.

A truly happy Christmas is a Christmas celebrating Jesus.

Sometime in the 15th or 16th centuries, when the Puritans controlled England and Catholicism was driven underground, and it was dangerous to put anything in writing, Catholic children were taught a song which was an underground catechism, a song which reminded them of the essentials of their faith, our faith. We know the song as *The 12 Days of Christmas*.

So let's sing it, and then we'll see how many of us know our catechism:

(sing; 1-12)

On the first day of Christmas:

What is the *Partridge in a Pear Tree*

The partridge is a bird which is said to be ready to die to protect its young, so it is a symbol of Jesus, God's Christmas gift to humankind.

The second day of Christmas:

What are the *2 Turtle Doves*

The Old Testament and the New Testament both tell of God's plan for salvation.

The third day of Christmas:

3 French Hens

The three persons of the Trinity or the three blessings: faith, hope and love

The fourth day of Christmas:

4 Calling Birds

The four Gospels which record the life of Jesus

The fifth day of Christmas:

5 Golden Rings

The first five books of the Bible, which tell the story of Creation, and the giving of the 10 commandments, and much more

The sixth day of Christmas:

6 Geese a Laying

The six days of Creation, ending with the creation and blessing of humankind

The seventh day of Christmas:

7 Swans a Swimming

The seven Catholic sacraments of the Christian faith – the holy communion, baptism, the two sacraments which we honour, plus confirmation, penance, marriage, holy orders and the anointing of the sick.

The eighth day of Christmas:

8 Maids a Milking

The eight beatitudes or blessings, as recorded in the Gospel according to St Matthew – you know the passage, from the fifth chapter of St Matthew:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.

The ninth day of Christmas:

9 Ladies Dancing

The nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, as listed by St Paul: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance

The tenth day of Christmas:

10 Lords a Leaping

The 10 commandments, given to the world at Mt Sinai as a basic moral code..

The eleventh day of Christmas:

11 Pipers Piping

The eleven faithful apostles, who carried the message of the Gospel into all the world

And finally, the twelfth day of Christmas:

12 Drummers Drumming

The 12 key points of the Christian faith, as listed in the Apostles' Creed, which is in your prayer book, so, let's sing:

(sing: 12-1)

The second chapter of St Luke's gospel suggests another way of celebrating the season, by recording three of the earliest events in Jesus' life. We will read three excerpts from this chapter; when you go home I suggest you re-read the whole chapter for yourself.

So, the first day of Christmas:

A reading from the Gospel according to St Luke, chapter 2, verses 15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Jesus is born, in a stable, celebrated by angels, visited by shepherds.

The second day of Christmas:

A reading from the Gospel according to St Luke, chapter 2, verses 34-38

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Jesus' parents bring him to the temple to be dedicated to God; Simeon and Anna recognise him as the Messiah.

The third day of Christmas, the Gospel for today:

A reading from the Gospel according to St Luke, chapter 2, verses 41-52

Now every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Another reading of verse 49 is *Did you not know would be about my Father's business?* Jesus was in God's house, learning how to do the Father's will, and that is a good model for us, not just on the third day of Christmas, but every day.

I tried to find a hymn or a song about Jesus' visit to the temple. What I found, appropriately enough, was a children's song, written by a Mennonite missionary to the Philippines, to go with a well-known French melody. I added the last verse.

For a children's song, you need actions, so I invite you to stand and join with me in singing *Where is Jesus?*

Here is Jesus **(Join hands in front)**
 Here is Jesus.
 Growing Up.
 Growing Up.
 Going to the temple,
 going to the feast.
 He is 12.
 He is 12.

In the temple. **(Point)**
 In the temple.
 He is there.
 He is there.
 Talking to the teachers.
 Talking to the teachers.
 In God's house.
 In God's house.

Where is Jesus? **(Looking)**
 Where is Jesus?
 Is he lost?
 Is he lost?
 Everyone is looking.
 Everyone is looking.
 Where is he?
 Where is he?

Here is Jesus. **(Heart)**
 Here is Jesus.
 In our hearts.
 In our hearts.
 Living in our hearts now.
 Living in our hearts now.
 Jesus lives.
 Jesus lives.

The Lord be with you, all the days of this Christmas and in the New Year ahead.

TIS 292

(print text)

TIS 297

(print text, omit verse 4)

TIS 307

(print text, change last line verse 1 to *and they gave him the name of Jesus.*

change last line verse 3 to *and they heard that his name was Jesus.*