

“Two Turtledoves . . .”

Luke 2:21-24

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Don't you just love a good mystery? I enjoy reading mystery novels and watching mystery stories on television or on “the big screen.” Especially British mysteries—the Brits just seem to know how to do mysteries right! This morning, I'd like to introduce you to a mystery story you may not know, a British mystery no less. You could call it, The Mystery of the Christmas Carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Since childhood, I've always enjoyed singing or hearing this carol, but for me it always seemed to be shrouded in mystery. Did all those strange gifts have a hidden meaning, or was it just playful nonsense? It wasn't until adulthood that I came across an intriguing legend about the origin of the song. According to the legend, the carol was written in England by Roman Catholics during the time when they could not practice their faith openly for fear of persecution, imprisonment, or even execution. According to the legend, some unknown Catholic leader created this seemingly innocent and rather nonsensical carol about a young woman and her true love to serve as a veiled “catechism song” to teach young Catholics some of the tenets of their faith.

According to this legend, the “true love” in the carol is God, and the “me” is any faithful Catholic. Not surprisingly, then, each of the twelve “gifts” refers to some tenet of Catholicism:

- One partridge symbolizes Jesus, who is like a mother partridge which feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings.
- Two turtledoves refer the Old and New Testaments.
- Three French hens represent the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love.
- Four calling birds signify the Four Gospels; and in some versions of the legend, the Four Major Old Testament Prophets as well.
- Five golden rings symbolize the five books of the Pentateuch or Torah; or in some versions of the legend, the five groups of ten beads on a rosary also.
- Six geese a-laying refer to the six days of creation.
- Seven swans a-swimming represent the seven Gifts of the Spirit; or in some versions of the legend, the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church.
- Eight maids a-milking signify the Eight Beatitudes.
- Nine ladies dancing symbolize the Nine Fruits of the Spirit.
- Ten lords a-leaping refer to the Ten Commandments.
- Eleven pipers piping represent the eleven faithful apostles.
- Twelve drummers drumming symbolize the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed; or in some versions of the legend, the Twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament as well.

That's a clever legend, don't you think? But as a life-long mystery lover, I wanted to know: Is this legend the proper solution to the mystery of the carol? So, I put on my Sherlock Holmes hat and went to work.

I knew from my study of church history that at least part of the legend is true. In 1559, England passed a law rendering Catholicism illegal. In practice, Catholicism could be practiced on private property and away from public view, but Catholics had to be careful. Enforcement of the law varied greatly during the 270 years before Parliament finally rescinded the immoral law, but sadly there were times when Protestant fanatics enforced it most inhumanely.

But as to the origin of the carol, the legend got it wrong. My historical detective work turned up a very different origin for the carol.¹ The earliest printed evidence of the carol in England is 1780 in a children's book called *Mirth without Mischief* where it is presented as a well-known "memory-and-forfeits" game. These are games in which the game's leader recites a verse, and each of the players repeats the verse. Then the leader adds another verse, and each of the players repeats both verses. And so on, and so on, until one of the players makes a memory mistake in repeating the multiplying verses. The player making the memory mistake has to pay a penalty to the other players, such as giving them each a kiss or a sweet treat.

I also discovered that the origin of the carol is not English, but French. At least three earlier French versions are known to have existed. In fact, the partridge, the bird mentioned in the first verse, was not even introduced to England—from France—until the late 1770s.

I learned many other interesting things about this carol—too many to go into in a sermon—but suffice it to say, the legend about the carol's creation by persecuted Catholics in England as a "catechism song" is false. Thus, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is what most people take it to be: a secular song that celebrates the Christmas season with wildly fanciful imagery of gifts and dancing and music.

But the song does have one fascinating true tie to The Gospel of Luke's account of the Christmas story. It mentions two turtle doves, as does our scripture lesson for today.

Mary and Joseph were quite devout in following the Torah. On the eighth day after his birth, Jesus was circumcised and named;² and at the appropriate time—that is, the fortieth day after his birth—Jesus was presented in the temple as Mary's first-born son, and she made the prescribed sacrifices.

We learn a great deal about Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from this brief passage, because two turtle doves is the prescribed sacrifice of the poor. The normal prescribed sacrifice for the presentation of the first-born and the mother's purification was a lamb and a turtle dove.³

One of the most significant characteristics of the Gospel according to Luke is his emphasis on Jesus' concern for the needs of the poor. For instance, Jesus spoke of the poor in his prophetic inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth,⁴ as well as in his Sermon on the

Plain.⁵ Frequently, Jesus juxtaposed the poor to the rich, asserting that the poor have equal access—perhaps even easier access—to the Kingdom of God.⁶ In Luke 2, however, the issue of poverty is more than simply a “cause” that Jesus championed. The stories of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and his presentation in the temple reveal that the experiences of the poor were Jesus’ *own* experiences. Perhaps in later years Joseph made a better living as a carpenter, but clearly when he and Mary were starting out, the family lived on the economic margins of society.

Jesus knew poverty first-hand. And that’s important, especially in a culture such as ours that worships wealth and celebrity, where laws are enacted that benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor, and where some religious leaders even preach what is known as “the gospel of prosperity.”

We need the Christmas story reminder of Mary’s sacrifice of two turtle doves. It reminds us that God is unreservedly the champion of the poor and disenfranchised.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Fr. Hal Stockert, “The Twelve Days of Christmas: An Underground Catechism.” Catholic Information Network, Dec 17, 1995. (web). Scott P. Richert, “What Are the 12 Days of Christmas?” *ThoughtCo*. Dec 9, 2017. (web). Hugh D. McKellar, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” *The Hymnal*, Vol. 45, No.4, October 1994. Scribd.com. “The Twelve Days of Christmas” Snopes.com. “A New Dial” Musicanet.org.

² Lev 12:3.

³ Lev 12:1-2, 4-8.

⁴ Luke 4:18-19.

⁵ Luke 6:20-23.

⁶ Luke 6:20-26; 16:19-31; 18:18-30; 21:1-4.