

Encouragement Encouragement



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'Holly and the Ivy'...

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'The holly and the ivy
When they are both full grown
Of all trees that are in the wood
The holly bears the crown'

You may find it strange to start December reflecting on this carol – now perhaps not so well known. Like so many carols, it brings us joy and the remembrance of an event which took place in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. But like so many beautiful carols they also tell us an important story that should make us reflect on the meaning of the words. Many are rooted in history and borrowed from country to country, the most famous of which is 'Silent night, Holy night' but each one has a special emphasis.

Holly and ivy are used to decorate our churches, our Advent wreaths, doors and lintels – but the carol itself has some timely reminders of why Advent and Christmas is so important.

Originally thought to date back a thousand years it has pagan connotations of faithfulness but it became Christianised around the Middle Ages, in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. It survived through the turbulence of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, emerging as a Christmas carol in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. First published by Cecil Sharp, in the early eighteenth century it had become a favourite in the 'Nine lessons and carols'.

So, let us look at the words. The first verse sets the scene. The Holly and the ivy are very different plants, ivy often referred to as 'poison ivy'. While an enduring plant, as any gardener will testify, it is nevertheless determined to survive. Although, apart from the first verse, it is not mentioned again, it has remained in the verse. This reminds me of the fact that in Advent we have to remember things that endure and have to play a part in our lives. They may not be the most outstanding but they bind us to a faithfulness and togetherness. Ivy survives cold winters and snow and reminds us that when cold...

winds blow we have to stay steadfast, to our beliefs.

But the words of the first verse throw us back to the holly – from the start this prickly plant, as anyone who has fashioned the wreath for Advent will know, can be quite painful. Its prickles are quite sharp, indeed like nails. We are then thrown into the thought not only of *the birth of Jesus*, but also *His Passion*. The Crown which is mentioned is, of course, the Crown of Thorns – the holly, therefore brings us into both the birth and death of Jesus.

'The holly bears a prickle
As sharp as any thorn
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
On Christmas Day in the morn'

This theme of Jesus' birth and death continues with the mention of 'the berry' that the holly bears.

'The holly bears a berry
As red as any blood
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To do poor sinners good'

This surely should remind us that the coming of the Lord Jesus at Christmas is not just 'a lovely event', or 'happy event', but there is, and was a point to the God-Man arriving in this world as a helpless babe. He came to free us from the dominion of sin and wrongdoing... to do us good. 'The Good News' is that it **is good** In all the sorrows and pains 'The Word' became flesh, truly human, to help us remember that life is transient and often difficult, but it ends in victory – in a life of joy. Advent days bring us many reminders of this fact, in all the readings and lessons. When we see the berry we should reflect on this and pray in thanksgiving for Jesus' birth.

'The holly bears a bark,
as bitter as any gall,
and Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
for to redeem us all...'

Advent is a season of the seed: The seed Jesus Christ said, is the Word of God in the human heart.
Caryll Houselander

Yes, life often has gall, hardship and difficulties, and struggles of many types. Was not Jesus given gall to drink – vinegar, even in His most agonising of moments? The covering of being human, our bark, is often a cover that does not protect us. For those of ill-health of any kind, and poverty it is itself ‘like gall’. The bark can be broken too, yet the lowly babe came to redeem us from our vulnerabilities and brokenness.

He came to give us courage and carry joy and sorrow, often simultaneously.

But at Christmas we also remember the beauty of the ‘Little Babe’, so little and innocent and the joy of new birth. We congratulate new mothers and fathers of a new life and rejoice. Even the hardest of hearts are often melted by the sight of a new-born child.

We are reminded that before the berry there is a delicate white flower – a blossoming. A child born to Mary and Joseph was a moment of great happiness. Even though they had no home, only a cave or stable, they would have this ‘white flower’ for years to come: to nurture and protect. Mary too is symbolised by the white flower of her purity and indeed St. Joseph, who is often represented with a lily. So we sing...

‘The holly bears a blossom
As white as lily flow’r
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To be our dear Saviour’



The picture above shows us the radiant happiness that Mary and Joseph had in that bare stable, as the light shows Him to be the Light. And so we sing...

‘O, the rising of the sun
And the running of the deer
The playing of the merry organ
Sweet singing in the choir’

I wonder, as we move through Advent whether we can use not only this carol but ‘any’ as a meditation on the Birth, life and Passion of Jesus.

Joy and sorrow are intermingled in all our lives and especially in the life of Jesus. We see it too, in those around us.

Let us make this Advent a song of Praise and Thanksgiving and Gratitude for a Light has come into the world and will come again.

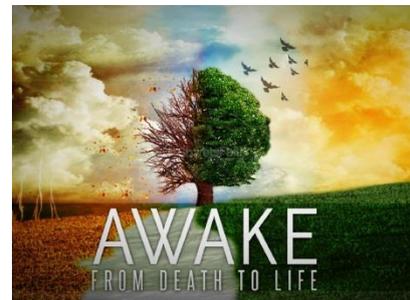
Halina Holman

Pope Francis

‘Advent is a journey toward Bethlehem. May we let ourselves be drawn by the light of God made Man.

Pope Benedict, Emeritus

‘Advent is the spiritual season of hope par excellence and is the season the whole church is called to take hope itself into the world.’ Rome



*Happy Christmas and many Blessings to All.
A huge thank you must go to everyone who has
contributed in any way to our work..
Please continue to support us with your prayer*

Feast Days in December

3rd St. Francis Xavier

4th St. John Damascene

5th **Second Sunday of Advent**

6th St. Nicholas

8th **The Immaculate Concep. Blessed Virgin Mary**

12th **Third Sunday of Advent**

13th St. Lucy

14th St. John of the Cross

19th **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

21st St. Peter Canisius, 23rd St. John Kanty

24th **Christmas Eve**

25th **The Nativity of the Lord**

26th **The Holy Family (Sunday)**

27th **St. John, Apostle & Evangelist**

28th **The Holy Innocents**

29th St. Thomas Becket

31st Seventh day in the Octave of Christmas

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