

The Dove: John 1.1-5, 29-34

John testified: I saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and it remained on him. And I myself have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God.



What's the dove doing in our Advent Calendar — and on all those Christmas cards? Not a nice Christmassy bird like the robin, perched on a pillar-box in the snow. What's the dove got to do with Christmas?

Usually (like here) the dove appears with a leafy olive-twigg in her beak — which tells us right away that this particular Christmas symbol comes from the Middle East. It's become a universally-recognised symbol of peace, made famous by Picasso, who drew and painted a series of doves and olive leaves. It's not hard to see why. The dove is always seen as a gentle, peaceful bird, easy prey for predators, with no defence except the swiftness of her flight. I guess gardeners might disagree — their relatives the pigeons can look quite aggressive when they swoop down on a newly-planted seed bed — but that's feeding, not fighting. They may flap their wings a lot, but they don't attack other birds — and the little birds on the bird-table aren't frightened of them. Even the sound of a dove is the essence of calm — that soporific, gentle cooing on a warm summer afternoon. When politicians are identified as “hawks” or “doves,” we all know what that means.

So the dove means “peace” — and peace definitely has something to do with Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. That dove expresses our longing for peace: “When comes the promised time, when war shall be no more?”. “Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife,” we sing, “and hear the angels sing” — angels singing “Peace on earth”. The famous Christmas

truce on the Western Front in 1914 was a spontaneous (and completely unofficial) response to the singing of “Stille Nacht” (“Silent night”) by the German troops on Christmas night — so much so that the High Command banned the singing of the carol in subsequent years on the grounds that it stopped the men wanting to slaughter each other. But it didn’t stop the war.

But actually the symbolism is more complex than you might think. The dove with an olive leaf (not branch) in her beak comes from the Bible story of Noah’s ark — you can read it in Genesis 8.10-12. It was Noah’s sign that the flood waters were beginning to subside: when he sent out the dove to fly over that vast, heaving mass of muddy waters, and she came back with a leaf in her beak, he knew that somewhere, somehow, the tops of the trees were beginning to re-appear. And then a week later he sent her out and she didn’t come back: there was enough greenery for her to find a perch and begin to feed. The earth was coming back to life.

So the dove with her olive leaf is a symbol of salvation, of rebirth, of life reborn out of death. Just as Noah and his family and all the animals were saved from the flood, from the consequences of human sinfulness, so Christians were saved in the waters of baptism from the consequences of their own sinfulness (1 Peter 3.20-22). That’s why Noah’s dove appears in some of the earliest Christian art, like this crudely-scratched graffito in the catacomb of Domitilla in Rome.



And Christian preachers like Tertullian explained to their Roman listeners that the olive branch was a symbol of the peace that only Christ could bring: the peace of reconciliation with a God who freely forgives, who invites us into new life and enables us to start again. He knew that to the Romans, it was the olive branch that symbolized peace, not the dove: bearing an olive branch was an ancient symbol used by embassies in making peace, the equivalent of waving the white flag. Put the two together and you get a powerful symbol that everybody understands.

But of course for Christians, the dove bears even more powerful symbolic freight — especially at baptism. In the Gospels, the dove symbolizes God’s Holy Spirit, coming down on Jesus at his own baptism in the river Jordan: *John testified: I saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and it remained on him. And I myself have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God.* The dove is a visible symbol of the invisible presence of God, anointing Jesus as the Messiah, God’s visible presence on earth, as John pours the muddy waters of the river Jordan over his head. So for Christians, the dove is a symbol of God’s presence with us in Jesus — and even more, of John’s promise that “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”. We are invited in our baptism to be united with Jesus in his death to sin and in the new life he opens up, powered by the presence of God in the Holy Spirit.



And once you’ve made the link between the dove and the Holy Spirit, the dove begins to appear all over the place. There she is in traditional paintings of the Annunciation, right at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly life. When the angel told Mary she was going to have a baby, Mary asked “How can this be?” “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow

you; therefore the child to be born will be holy: he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1.34-5).



The moment of conception, the moment of new life: that’s very much the work of the Holy Spirit. And there she was right at the beginning of everything, back at the moment of creation itself, when the Holy Spirit — a mighty wind, a wind from God — “brooded” like a mother bird over the face of the waters of chaos (Genesis 1.2), waiting for the divine Word to say, “Let there be light.” What has the dove got to do with Christmas? Pretty much everything!



*Spirit of truth and love,
Life-giving, Holy Dove,
Speed forth thy flight!
Move on the water’s face,
Bearing the lamp of grace,
And in earth’s darkest place,
Let there be light!*

God bless,
Loveday

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