

*Of all the trees that are in the wood  
The holly bears the crown!*

*For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11.9*

Open up today's Advent Calendar window and there you will find a very festive picture of 'the holly and the ivy' representing a much loved, though slightly curious Christmas carol. (*Holly also appears in another traditional carol in the music clip.*) The setting for this song seems to be a wood – but why are we in a wood? And why does the holly wear a crown? Not, I would suggest, your typical Christmas scene. But it may not surprise you to know that this carol has undergone several manifestations before arriving at the Christian version we sing today.

The depiction of Holly and Ivy has come to symbolize different things over time, from images associated with the Greek and Roman gods; to the Druids and pagan rituals of the winter solstice; to a medieval battle of the sexes using raucous folk songs; till finally emerging as a homage to Jesus Christ and his Virgin birth.

We can trace images of ivy all the way back to Classical times. Ivy was sacred to the gods of wine and fertility — to the Greek Dionysus (aka Bacchus): and that's where the trouble starts. Dionysus was also the god of revels, of madness and chaos, his followers were dangerous and unrestrained in their pursuit of earthly pleasures. On their heads they wore wreaths of ivy and Dionysus himself carried a staff of ivy-wood, wrapped with ivy leaves and tipped by a pine cone, from which dripped honey. Medieval purveyors of alcohol were quick to latch on to this coupling of ivy and merrymaking and took to using ivy as signage for their taverns and hung large bunches of ivy over alehouse doors.

In response to this association the church forbade Christians to decorate their houses and churches with evergreen foliage, and the Elizabethan Puritan William Prynne disapproved of the practice so much that he wrote:

*"At Christmas men do always Ivy get,  
And in each corner of the house it set;  
But why do they then use that Bacchus-weed?  
Because they mean, then, Bacchus-like to feed."*

Thankfully despite the disapproval of the church fathers, the Holly and Ivy gradually found their way back into our Christmas traditions.

The story of holly goes back to pagan and druid rituals with the belief that each year at the time of the summer and winter solstice a battle would take place deep in the forests of medieval Britain. The evergreen Holly King would challenge and overpower Oak King to rule

over winter, and the Oak King — the Green Man — would overpower the Holly King to rule over summer.

Supposedly, in medieval English village life, men and women would hold singing competitions in midwinter with the men praising Holly for its masculine strength and disparaging the Ivy for its femininity. The women of course would take the opposite view and praise the Ivy for its feminine qualities and scorn the Holly for its manliness. Perhaps not surprisingly, more 'Holly' songs survived, as in this example:

*Nay, Ivy, nay; it shall not be i-wys ;*

*Let Holly hafe the maystery, as the manner is.*

*Holly stond in the Halle fayre to behold;*

*Ivy stond without the dore; she is full sore acold.*

*Holly and his merry men they dancyn and they sing.*

*Ivy and hur maidens they wepyn and they wryng.*

(Ballad from the time of Henry VI)

In this gender war the Holly King definitely had the upper hand, but these song contests were meant to be light-hearted and teasing. However, Holly King's image of womanhood certainly wouldn't be accepted or go unchallenged today.

And yet from these slightly bawdy folk songs emerged one of the loveliest of Nativity carols emphasizing the theme of all creation rejoicing in depths of midwinter through the story of Christ's birth — that is the Christmas story. But there's also a challenge here, nature and creation are an intricate part of these people's lives. It's part of their mindset to worship with and through the natural world – God's world. There's a naivety, simplicity, a sense of awe at the mystery of being at one with nature. During this pandemic many have come to realize the healing properties of immersing ourselves in green spaces, whether that's a walk in the countryside or a pot plant on the window-sill. We're rediscovering that in order for humanity to thrive, nature must thrive. We are all part of the delicate balance of God's creation.

Here the Pagan symbols for life and renewal, Holly and Ivy, are captured in words that possess a definite Christian meaning. The blossom, 'white as the lily flower,' recalls the purity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the innocence of the birth of Jesus. The red berry recalls the blood of Christ, the prickle of the leaves is sharp as the Crown of Thorns, the bark bitter as the gall given to Christ to drink as he died on the cross – the holy one now reigns and wears the crown.

*"Of all the trees that are in the wood, the Holly bears the Crown."*

*The holly and the ivy*

*When they are both full grown*

*Of all trees that are in the wood  
The holly bears the crown*

*Chorus: O, the rising of the sun  
And the running of the deer  
The playing of the merry organ  
Sweet singing in the choir*

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

*Chorus*

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

*Chorus*

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

*Chorus*

Advent blessings, Linda