

## Snakes and Ladders

As I write this paper it is just a few days after Christmas. At a Christmas gathering with friends we were discussing the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” and the suggestion that, at a time of persecution of Catholics in this country, the song was developed as an “underground” method of teaching and learning by heart certain elements of the Catholic faith when it was dangerous to be in possession of actual printed materials.

Those of us who can still remember the old “penny catechism” will well remember the numbered lists we had to learn: 15 mysteries of the Rosary; 12 articles of the Creed; 10 commandments of God; 6 commandments of the Church; 7 sacraments; 3 theological and 4 cardinal virtues; 7 gifts and 12 fruits of the Holy Spirit; 7 corporal and 7 spiritual works of mercy; 8 beatitudes; 7 capital sins or vices... you still remember them all, right? (And, of course, while they may not be listed numerically anymore, they are all still to be found in our current catechism.)

And so it has been suggested that the various numbers contained in “The Twelve Days of Christmas” referred, for those in the know, to some of those lists: the 7 swans a-swimming were the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit or the 7 sacraments; the 8 maids a-milking were the 8 beatitudes; the 10 lords a-leaping were the 10 commandments, the 12 drummers drumming were the 12 articles of the creed. The 2 turtle doves were the old and new testaments; the 4 calling (or colly) birds were the 4 gospels; the 6 geese a-laying were the 6 days of creation, and so on. However, as wonderful as all this may sound, there is apparently no hard evidence to support the theory, which is now largely dismissed. It doesn’t really make much sense when you stop and think about it because the song doesn’t give the details of the list to which each number supposedly applies. This you would still have had to learn from some other source, so how was the song any help? It is more generally suggested that it was simply a “memory and forfeits” Christmas game for children involving reciting the verses in turn until someone made a mistake and so had to pay a forfeit.

People have tried to make sense of that other, otherwise nonsensical, Christmas song “I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In”, feeling that there must be some sort of symbolism behind the three ships given that no actual ships ever sailed to the landlocked town of Bethlehem. Did they represent the three wise men, or perhaps, the three members of the Holy Family? No one really knows. The way in which the lyrics repeat in each verse suggests it might have been composed as a children’s song and so didn’t really have to make any sense. All that can be said is that it is an English carol first published in the 1600s, and it has been suggested that the nautical theme may have to do with it’s English roots as

seafaring nation, and the song expressing joy at Christ's coming at Christmas in the same way that a ship's safe return to port would be joyfully welcomed. By the same token it could simply be a children's Christmas song with imaginative lyrics!

All of this is by way of saying that occasionally, as adults, we discover new meanings to familiar things from our childhood. They don't necessarily change anything, but they do tend to open up a whole new way of looking at them. Such might be the case with those two Christmas songs, depending on whether or not you already knew what we have said about them, and such might also be the case with the children's game of Snakes and Ladders.

I was watching a documentary recently about children's games in general and it came as quite a revelation to me to learn that Ludo originated in India in the 6<sup>th</sup> (or even 4<sup>th</sup>) century where it was known as Pachisi, hence the American name Parcheesi by which the game is known there. Seeing the proper spelling in print as opposed to the American version, should have been a clue as to its origins, but there was no such clue when it came to Snakes and Ladders also having originated in India. (It's worth checking out a couple of websites just to see the different board designs of the ancient and modern games.<sup>1</sup>)

It is thought that the original game was invented by Hindu spiritual teachers to teach children about the beneficial effects of doing good deeds and the ill-effects of bad deeds. The board was divided into ten rows of ten squares (as modern Snakes and Ladders boards are) with ladders representing virtues and snakes vices. The squares of virtue included reliability, humility, generosity, knowledge, faith, asceticism, and so on, and the squares of vice were lust, anger, murder, theft, disobedience, vanity, lying, drunkenness, debt, rage, greed and pride. The purpose of the game was to show that a person can attain salvation through performing good deeds whereas doing evil deeds could result in their being reborn in a lower life-form. The number of virtue/ladder squares was deliberately less than the number of vice/snake squares to make the point that the path of good is very difficult compared to that which leads to sin<sup>2</sup>.

Coincidental with having seen the documentary, one of the texts in the Office of Readings for Advent was from St Irenaeus in which he said: "He who was to be born of the woman, in the likeness of Adam, was announced as 'watching for the head' of the serpent", a reference to God's words in Genesis when, after the Fall, he says to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel." [3 v 15]

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<sup>1</sup> One is the Wikipedia (the on-line encyclopaedia) site and another sandradodd.com, searching under: history of snakes and ladders.

<sup>2</sup> (information taken from the Wikipedia webpage)

St Irenaeus' use of the phrase "watching for the head of the serpent" not only makes a connection with the obvious need to guard against being bitten by a snake, but is also a reference to the need to avoid the efforts of the devil (popularly pictured as the serpent-tempter of Eden) to tempt us to sin. At the same time, as I read those words, the image of the Snakes and Ladders board came to mind and the fact that, as we play the game, we are constantly on the look-out for the snakes, hoping that the roll of the dice doesn't result in our landing on a snake's head so that we have to follow its body back down to a lower square on the board, further away from "home" (square 100) and our hope of winning the game. My thought (which, as we'll see, wasn't as original as I thought!) was of the modern game of Snakes and Ladders being a possible way of teaching children about good and bad, and sin and grace, just as the original game did in India.

My thought also involved the scriptural image of a ladder, in this case Jacob's ladder of Genesis chapter 28, "standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven (with) angels of God going up it and coming down." This is sometimes how we picture our way to heaven – a long flight of steps that we have to climb (and down which we can also fall!) with God sitting at the top. Also, I don't know whether anyone still remembers the "pagan babies" ladder chart we used to have in school once a year, possibly during Lent? You cut out a child from a multicultural selection of paper figures which you then coloured in, and with each penny donated (two shillings and six pence - 12½ p - over the course of the month) your "pagan baby" moved symbolically one step up the ladder leading to heaven. The money given was then sent to the missions to help pay for the Christian education of children there.

As I say, my immediate thought as I read St Irenaeus, was that the modern game of Snakes and Ladders would make a useful teaching tool on the subject of the beneficial effects of doing good, and the adverse effects of doing wrong, in terms of our objective as Christians of attaining to heaven. But then, in doing a little research on the internet, I discovered (on Wikipedia once again) that someone had already stolen my thunder.

The original version of Snakes and Ladders produced in Victorian England in 1892 following its arrival from India, owed its popularity to the moral message, adapted from the Indian game, contained in its design. Then too, the most widely known board design in America (where it is known as Chutes and Ladders) is a playground with children climbing ladders and sliding down chutes (what we call slides). "The artwork on the board teaches a morality lesson, the squares at the bottom of the ladders show a child doing a good or sensible deed and at the top of the ladders there is an image of the child enjoying the reward. At the top of the chutes, there are pictures of children

engaging in mischievous or foolish behaviour and the images at the bottom show the child suffering the consequences.”

So, while there are some versions around that seek to make a connection with the moral message of the original Hindu game, in its more usual form Snakes and Ladders is simply a children’s game of chance dependent on the roll of the dice. Players hope to climb ladders and avoid sliding down snakes in their efforts to reach home and win, but there is nothing more substantial or morally educational to playing the game – which seems a bit of a lost opportunity really, a situation that will continue as long as children playing Snakes and Ladders remain unaware of its origins.

That said, and imagining the game even if we don’t actually play it, with heaven as our goal, our true home, what are the spiritual ladders that we need to aim for and to climb in life? Conversely, what are the snakes, the temptations and sins, that we need to avoid? And, of course, our progress in striving to do what is right and avoid what is wrong and sinful doesn’t depend on anything as arbitrary as the throw of a dice. We have the certainty of God’s grace to help us if we would only ask – and especially at those times when we see the snake’s head approaching and need a good “roll of the dice” to get us past it and safely on our way.

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