
Christmas Traditions



The Nativity



- The scene of Jesus, Mary and Joseph huddled in the stable is probably the most common visual image of the Christmas season
- St Francis of Assisi (d 1226) is credited with arranging the first nativity scene, complete with animals and a live baby. Tradition says he was angered by the excesses of a medieval Church and wanted to create a Christmas which would be accessible to all



The Nativity

- St Bonaventure (D 1274) records the event as follows.
- ‘It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Grecio to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion, [St. Francis] determined to keep it with all possible solemnity; and lest he should be accused of lightness or novelty, he asked and obtained the permission of the sovereign Pontiff. Then he prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed.’



The Nativity

- ‘The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. The man of God [St. Francis] stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis, the Levite of Christ. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King; and being unable to utter His name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem.’



What do the animals symbolise?

- Since then a range of animals have been placed around the manger….
  - Donkey
    - Symbol of humility, the triumph of Christ





What do the animals symbolise?

- Sheep
  - Folklore says that the reason that sheep walk in procession is out of respect for the good news the shepherds received while tending for them
- Ox
  - A symbol of sacrifice, the ox is said to have used its breath to keep the infant warm



What do the animals symbolise?

- Cockerel
  - In classical mythology the cockerel is dedicated to Apollo because it notes the rising sun. In the Christmas tradition the cockerel announces the good news of the birth of the messiah – Christ is born
- Stork
  - Mid 16th century tradition says the stork was so upset at where the baby was laid that she plucked feathers from her breast to keep him warm. In Poland children dress in nativity characters and storks when they go carolling.
- Camel
  - The bearer of the wise men, in southern Spain the youngest camel brings the gifts for the children



The Nativity

- However, although this Nativity scene is often part of the Christmas celebrations now, it is not found in either of the two stories about the birth of Jesus which are found in the Bible. No stable, donkey, sheep or goat is mentioned in either account of the birth of Jesus in the gospels.



The Birth of Jesus

- The Gospel of Luke has the longest story of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew has a shorter story.
- These two stories are very different and as we read them we must remember they were not written to report on the birth of Jesus but rather to show how important Jesus was, from this birth!



Why is Jesus' birthday the 25th of December?

- The ancient Romans observed the festival of the god Saturn – *Saturnalia* – a festival which ran for a week from December 17 – 23. The festival thanked the gods for the fruits of the earth and for the farming skills which helped them cultivate the resources of the land
- In 274, the Emperor Aurelian declared the festival of *sol invitcus* to the sun god Mithras on December 25th.
- Gradually, the two festivals ran into one, celebrated in late December



Why is Jesus' birthday the 25th of December?

- At same time, the people of northern Europe celebrated the winter yuletide, when the great mother goddess was thought to give birth to the baby sun god
- After the winter solstice on December 21st they lit a bonfire (onto which they threw a huge yule log) to encourage the return of the sun and a good harvest in the year to come



Why is Jesus' birthday the 25th of December?

- Christmas Day – the day of the birth of Jesus – was celebrated whenever communities chose (often in September during the Jewish Rosh Hashanah festival)
- However, in the 3rd century (320/354 CE) Pope Julius established Dec 25th as the universal Christmas day, hoping to supersede the pagan celebrations



Why is Jesus' birthday the 25th of December?

- Although the date was now fixed, the festive celebration of Christmas was not widespread, partly because of its association with pagan festivals
- In fact, Oliver Cromwell sought to ban Christmas festivities with his puritan 'blue laws' believing that the feast should be solemn and not a time for rejoicing



So where do the traditions we now enjoy come from?



Christmas Decorations



'Deck the halls with boughs of Holly...'



- Pagan Rome decorated their homes during Saturnalia with greenery and lights. To avoid persecution, early Christians continued the custom with the use of holly…for them though, the sharp leaves represented the pain of the crucifixion, the red berries the blood of Christ



Christmas plants

- Pointsettia
  - Legend says a peasant girl, saddened by her lack of gifts on Christmas day picked some weeds and lay them at the feet of a statue of Mary. They were transformed. The star shape is said to represent the star hovering over the birthplace of Jesus, the red the blood of both the children slaughter by Herod and the adult Christ.
- Christmas rose:
  - Legend says that the child Jesus turned from the gifts of the wise men and took the white flower of the black hellebore. Since then it has been used as a charm against evil spirits.



The Christmas Tree

- Tree worship goes back to pagan times when the evergreen tree represented a powerful symbol of life in the midst of death.
- Creation myths often involved trees; St Boniface was said to have used a fir tree as a symbol of the Trinity.



The Christmas Tree



Victoria and Albert decorate the Christmas tree

- 1834, Prince Albert, the German husband of Queen Victoria, brought the tradition of bringing a German fir tree as a Christmas decoration to the royal household
- Illustrations of the tree were placed in the *London News* and immediately the tradition became fashionable



Candles

- Originally, candles were used to light the tree, a custom said to have been started by Martin Luther how wanted to simulate the effect of a starlit heaven, such as would have covered the child Jesus.



Strings of beads and balls

- Early trees were decorated with edibles: nuts, lollies and fruit
- In Germany, gingerbread, shaped into stars, heats angels and bells were baked hard top hang from the tree
- Prince Albert is said to have decorated his tree with strings of beads and hand blown glass balls and ornaments from the town of Lauscha, in Germany



Tinsel

- Tinsel was again a German invention, coming into popularity around 1610.
- At that time real silver was used, and machines were invented which pulled the silver out into the wafer thin strips for tinsel. Silver was durable, but it tarnished quickly, especially near candles.
- Attempts were made to use a mixture of lead and tin, but this was heavy and tended to break under its own weight. As a result, silver was used for tinsel right up to the mid-20th century.



Bells

- Use of bells as a decoration comes from pre-Christian belief that bells strung around the neck of a person warded off evil spirits
- In the time of Christ, those with leprosy wore bells to warn people from coming near them
- The use of bells in Christian worship began in the 9th century both to gather worshippers and to advise of the imminent death of someone – the ‘passing bell’



The Advent Wreath



- The earliest Advent wreaths were made in the Middle Ages; however, the first modern Advent wreath was made by Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881) a German theologian and educator
- Legend says that as Christmas approached, the children in Wichern's orphanage would ask how long it was to Christmas had arrived.
- In 1839, he built a wooden ring (made out of a cartwheel) with 19 small red and 4 big white candles. A small candle was lit successively every day of Advent. On Sundays, a large white candle was lit. This eventually led to the modern Advent wreath with its four candles.



Christmas cards

- The first commercially produced Christmas card came out in….





Christmas cards

- The first commercially produced Christmas card came out in …1843





Christmas cards

- John Calcott Horsley was commissioned by Sir Henry Cole (aka Old King Cole, civil servant, designer of the first postage stamp the Penny Black,) to produce a ready made greeting card to send to friends and family. The card was supposed to raise awareness of the plight of the poor, however it showed a very comfortable family eating and drinking
- Of the 1000 hand coloured cards made, less than 10 remain





Christmas carols

- Carols (songs of praise and joy) have been sung since the beginning of time, often in connection with pagan festivals which accompanied the change of seasons
- As with much of the festivity of Christmas the Puritans banned carol singing although many carols survived the period, being sung in secret
- Perhaps the most famous carol service is that held each Christmas eve at Kings College Cambridge



Christmas carols

- When released in the 1840's, *O Holy Night* was criticised for its poor musical taste and for its 'total absence of the spirit of religion'.
- *Rudolph* (the names Rollo and Reginald were rejected) *the Red Nosed Reindeer* was originally a colouring story book designed as promotion for an American department store. Melody was added in 1949 and since then, the song has become one of the best selling songs, second only to *White Christmas*



Christmas carols

- *Have yourself a merry little Christmas* was originally a song about despair and failure…
  - Have yourself a merry little Christmas, May your heart be light, In a year our troubles will be out of sight…
- Judy Garland had the lyrics changed….
  - Have yourself a merry little Christmas, Let your heart be light, From now on our troubles will be out of sight…



Christmas carols

- *Joy to the World* takes its lyrics directly from Psalm 98. American composer Lowell Mason put the melody to the words and attributed the piece to Handel….a hoax that lasted for more than 100 years.



Christmas carols

- Charles Wesley (brother of John Wesley founder of the Methodist Church) wrote the lyrics, requesting a slow sombre melody for his words. Mendelssohn wrote the melody as a Cantata requesting it never be used for secular purposes. William Cummings ignored them both, producing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* in 1855



Christmas carols

- Believe it…or not!
  - Jingle Bells was written in 1857 by James Pierpont to commemorate sleigh racing in Boston.



Christmas food: herbs

- Basil:
  - A favourite in Greece. Considered protection against ‘karkanzari’, mysterious begins thought to be in the souls of those who found no rest in heaven. They wandered about during the 12 days of Christmas and would be exorcised by a priest who would dip a cross adorned with basil in holy water and sprinkle it around the house.
- Lavender:
  - Legend says that Mary needed somewhere to hang Jesus’ washing and chose a lavender bush. When Mary put the clothes on it, the bush had no scent, but after she collected them they smelt fragrant and fresh – of lavender.



Christmas food: herbs

- Rosemary:
  - The name comes from the Latin *Ros Marinus*, meaning sea dew, so the herb is linked to Venus the love-goddess who came from the foam of the sea.
  - Rosemary is used in weddings to signify fidelity, it is carried to keep you safe from thunder and lightening, plagues and disease and sniffing it three times prevents you from growing old.
  - Rosemary is said to only grow in homes where the women rules!
  - Legend says Mary placed the baby Jesus' clothes on a rosemary bush; the fragrance of rosemary comes from the child's swaddling cloths and the colour from Mary's robe.



Christmas food: herbs

- Thyme:
  - Grew abundantly in Palestine and cut with hay to fill the manger. A symbol of the bravery of the Holy Family: Jesus in his suffering, Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows and Joseph for his patience and courage.
- Pennyroyal:
  - Legend says it blooms at midnight on midnight on Christmas eve. Made into a wreath to protect against giddiness.



Christmas food: pies

- Mince pies
  - In Elizabethan times mince pies were made with shredded beef and mutton to which were added raisins, currants, prunes and seasoned with cloves and saffron. The pastry of the pie was the ‘crib’ into which the ingredients were put.
  - In later times, apples were added, and finally spices, the gifts of the wise men.
  - The Lattice work on the top was symbolic of the hay, and sometimes a pastry baby was placed ‘in the hay’.
  - Eventually the meat was omitted.
  - Tradition says you must eat 12 pies between Christmas and the twelfth night to ensure luck.



Christmas food: pudding

- Pudding
  - The first puddings were a kind of soup made with beef or mutton, thickened with bread. They were made during the depth of winter to remind the earth goddess not to forget to bring the sun
  - In medieval times, the pudding was made of shin meat, together with currants, raisins, prunes or plums, spices, sugar, claret and lemon juice.



Christmas food: pudding

- In time, the meat was left out, and the more solid pudding was wrapped in cloth for boiling
- Shaped now like the sun, many communities set fire to it – aimed to help the dying sun return to life!



Christmas Colours

- Red: fire, blood and martyrdom.
  - In heraldry; magnanimity, and fortitude
- Green: nature, youth and hope of eternal life.
  - In heraldry; love, joy and abundance
- White: Purity, truth, Innocence and hope
  - In heraldry; purity and truth
- Blue: Hope, divine love, piety and sincerity
  - In heraldry; chastity, loyalty and fidelity
- Gold: Glory
  - In heraldry; faith, constancy and wisdom



Christmas Colours

- What colour cloths will be worn and used for Christmas Day Mass?



Putting the Christ back into Christmas

When you decorate your tree, think of Martin Luther and the stars which shone above the child Jesus…

When you put your wreath on your door, remember the holly and the drops of blood which fell from Jesus at the Crucifixion…



Putting the Christ back into Christmas

When you buy your Christmas cards, remember that, originally, they were supposed to raise awareness for the plight of the poor…

When you see Santa Claus, remember that the intention of St Nicholas was to alleviate suffering….



Putting the Christ back into Christmas

When you hear carols in shopping centres, remember that *O Holy night* did have it right….it is a Holy Night…

Remember that the wise men didn't only give gifts, but time and faith and devotion…



Putting the Christ back into Christmas

When you hear and see bells, remember that they invite us to worship throughout the year…

When you are deciding what to do on Christmas Day, remember that it is the one day a year the Christian community chose to gather to acknowledge the gift of love which came into the world to make us whole….