

## Father Christmas.

Written for young people and adults alike!

Christmas! What a wonderful time of the year especially for children. I think the first Christmas I can really remember would be the one in 1943, I was almost four years old. My two elder brothers who were seven and ten years old at this time were very good at filling my young head with all sorts of stories. The most prominent ones included the existence of ghosts which frightened me half to death, the man who had lots of noses on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December. I sat for hours on the windowsill on New Year's Day waiting for this chap that never turned up. He has as many noses as there are days left in the year they said: I was a bit too young to work that one out. Another time when we trailed to Stubbins Gas works to fill our little homemade barrow with lumps of coke, I was informed by my brother John that we were in Germany.

But, going back to that Christmas in 1943 is one thing that sticks in my mind. On Christmas Eve I had been told by my lovable brothers to keep my eye on the coffin maker's house that belonged to Mr. Welsh across the road, especially the smoking chimney pot, Elizabeth Welsh was the first to get her Christmas presents because that was Santa's first visit. Unfortunately, I missed him due to mums' insistence that it was way past my bedtime.

I am not sure whether that was the Christmas I found a toy car stuffed in my pillowcase. In those days there were no remote cars that ran on batteries, but mechanical toys made of tin plate and had to be wound up with a key. I wanted to investigate the contents of my pillowcase as soon as my feet felt the bulging sack of delights at the bottom of the bed at four o'clock in the morning but was told to get back to sleep by more than one voice in the household. The euphoria of that Christmas morning did not last for when I did get the shining car out of its box Father Christmas had forgotten to include the key. My estimation of this wonderful benevolent fly-anywhere chap with a

white beard and a fluffy red coat received a dent that day as I had to wait for Santa to finish his well-deserved holiday before I got the key.

So, is Father Christmas real? In one sense the answer to that question is yes and, in another sense, the answer is no. With the help of the internet, we can find out more about the origins of Father Christmas. You will all be aware that he has another name, Santa Claus. But these are not the only names ascribed to Father Christmas he is also known as St. Nicholas. The name Santa Claus evolved from Nick's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas).

St Nicholas, who lived between 270 and 343 AD, was a Christian bishop of Greek origin and was born near Myra in modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that he gave away all his inherited wealth and travelled the countryside helping the poor and sick. One of the best-known St. Nicholas stories is the time he saved three poor sisters from being sold into slavery or prostitution by their father by providing them with a dowry so that they could be married.

Of course, these facts about St. Nicholas have to be taken at face value and we cannot be certain that they are absolute truth, but we can assume that St Nicholas did exist, that he was a Christian bishop, and that he had a reputation for being very generous and benevolent with his possessions.

Up to quite recently, there was little information about where exactly St Nicholas was buried, although records show that he was laid to rest somewhere in the church that bears his name. Previously archaeologists believed that his relics were taken by looters to Bari in Italy, although now the consensus is that the raiders took the wrong bones. The church in Demre, a town in the Antalya district in the south of Turkey was covered by rising sea levels in the Mediterranean centuries ago. However, another church was built on top of the original building to protect St Nicholas' tomb. Archaeologists only recently found mosaics and stone flooring underneath, which helped them find what they believe is the original church and St Nicholas' grave.

So, how did a kind and generous bishop called Nicholas who lived in the third century evolve into our present-day Father Christmas? St.

Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered in honour of the anniversary of his death.

In 1804, John Pintard, a member of the New York Historical Society, distributed woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society's annual meeting. The background of the engraving contains now-familiar Santa images including stockings filled with toys and fruit hung over a fireplace.

In 1809, Washington Irving helped to popularize the Sinter Klaas stories when he referred to St. Nicholas as the patron saint of New York in his book, *The History of New York*.

In 1841, thousands of children visited a Philadelphia shop to see a life-size Santa Claus model. It was only a matter of time before stores began to attract children, and their parents, with the lure of a peek at a "live" Santa Claus. In the early 1890s, the Salvation Army needed money to pay for the free Christmas meals they provided to needy families. They began dressing up unemployed men in Santa Claus suits and sending them into the streets of New York to solicit donations. Those familiar Salvation Army Santa's have been ringing bells on the street corners of American cities ever since. So now we know how Christmas developed into the Christmas we know today.

I would like to add just three comments to what I have written so far. The first thing we need to be mindful of is that something that really happened in the past and has some truth can easily get distorted. In the case of Bishop Nicholas, we have a good example of how a normal benevolent man who lived long ago was given an exalted status by the church, made into a Saint, and finished up as our present-day Father Christmas. We need to be careful to separate legend from fact. In contrast to the legend of Nicholas the record of Jesus Christ has remained the same ever since divinely inspired writers wrote about him in the Bible. The life and record of Jesus Christ, his ministry, atoning death and resurrection is not legend but reliable and dependable truth.

Secondly, we need to separate the Christmas presented to us by commercialism, entertainment, too many chocolates and for grown-

ups too much alcohol and hangovers. Christmas can be a wonderful time for being with our family, sharing our presents, playing party games and all the other festivities that are associated with Christmas. It brings a welcome break from school, homework, and a time when everything stops on the one day in the year. But we must also remember that there are many for which Christmas can be the loneliest time of the year.

The third thing and most important thing is to remember the real meaning of the term Christmas. 'Mas' in the old Greek language means a big gathering of people and with its connection with Christ means 'The Gathering of Christ'. Many years before Christ was born, 25<sup>th</sup> December used to be a pagan's day for sacrifices. In 336AD The Emperor Constantine changed the day from pagan's day of sacrifices to the commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ. He called the day 'The Mass.' The 'X' in Xmas was popularised by secularists and atheists to eradicate the very mention of Christ in whom they do not believe. So, for Christians Christmas is to remember the wonderful birth and incarnation of the Saviour who was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

In 1943 I waited patiently to see a man in a red coat with a snowy white beard climb down a sooty smoky chimney in the house across the road to deliver his first load of presents. I hoped our house would be next before he visited ten million other households in the UK. If all he did wrong was to forget my key, he did very well. We left him a piece of cake and a glass of sherry to help him get through his busy schedule. They weren't there the following morning, so I hope he appreciated our kind gesture.

I hope you have a happy Christmas.

Les Yates