



Gift-giving and Saint Nicholas' Day in Early December

As Christians, we want to be true to the bible and offer the real message of Christmas - the birth of Jesus - God coming down to earth as a human baby - fully divine yet also fully human - the Saviour of the world.

It is a wonderful privilege to share this wonderful truth with young families we welcome through our groups.

Some groups run special Christmas services for the under fives and their grown ups and there are lots of opportunities for parties and celebrations and accounts of the nativity events.

Some groups may build on the story each session starting with Mary and Elizabeth and then the journey to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph and of course the birth in the stable, angels, visitors, animals and presents! Some dwell on the symbolism of Advent with candle lighting and thoughts of getting ready for a special baby... something that lots of little children may be very familiar with.

Some organize a 'posada' using figures of Mary, Joseph and the donkey who travel round the family homes, staying overnight and then moving on until they reach the crib service on Christmas Eve .

"But what do we do with 'Father Christmas' "

Some groups have an adult dressed up as Father Christmas or 'Santa Claus' whilst others do not. For the children, it is a time of great excitement (and some anxiety for certain children who don't like people dressed up!) as Father Christmas marches into the room with much merry 'ho-ho-ho-ing', giving out presents to the children.

Whatever your thoughts are on Father Christmas, it is worth considering the origins of this traditional personality with the increasing focus on his image everywhere at Christmas. Father Christmas is very much a part of the UK Christmas tradition and associated with delivering presents on Christmas Eve.



The 'magic' of certain Christmas traditions can lead to deeper explanations of elves who make the toys, trips to Lapland, sleighs, reindeer with self esteem issues and chimneys and round the world trips with black sacks of toys. And who would wish to quash the wonder of little children as they look forward to Christmas Day?... but as Christians, are we building towards an anticipation of that most wondrous gift of all and the real truth that Christmas Day brings? If we are Christian parents, have we thought through how we represent Father Christmas to our own under fives?

Being aware of the origins of Santa Claus in the life of a sainted, good and generous man may aid us in our conversations with others regarding the topic of 'Father Christmas... man or myth'?

On the European continent, Saint Nicholas' Day celebrations involve the giving of presents and Christmas Day is reserved as the Christian festival with Christ at the centre. There are still superstitious or traditional stories involving the Christ Child, the tree, (even Black Peter who puts naughty children in a sack), etc but it must be possible to steer a way through the traditions and offer the true meaning of 'Christ' 'mas' - Christ's birth.

Learning about other cultural treats and traditions for Christmas is significant as we welcome an increasing number of families from Continental Europe where their Christmas traditions vary with ours.

In many places, St. Nicholas is the main gift giver. His birthday is December 6, which falls early in the season. In some places he arrives in the middle of November and moves about the countryside, visiting schools and homes to find out if children have been good. In other places, he comes in the night and finds carrots and hay for his horse or donkey along with children's wish lists. Small treats are left in shoes or stockings so the children will know he has come.

In places where St. Nicholas is prominent, his day, not Christmas, is the primary gift giving day. Parties may be held on the eve, December 5th, and shoes or stockings left for St. Nicholas to fill during the night. Children will find treats of small gifts, fruit or nuts, and special Nicholas candies and cookies. St. Nicholas gifts are meant to be shared, not kept for oneself:

- To tell the story of a Christian, whose model life inspired compassion and charity
- To explain the roots of Santa Claus and Father Christmas
- To focus on giving more than on receiving
- To emphasize small treats and family fun
- To offer another context for gift giving
- To help keep Jesus the centre of Christmas



A very good resource website to find out more is:

www.stnicholascenter.org

Take time to read through the various reference pages of this site for inspiration and ideas:

- A toy service as a form of St Nicholas celebration. Make the most of the toy giving message of Saint Nicholas by organizing a toy service as close to St Nicholas Day as possible... a great way to welcome fringe families.
- Give chocolate coins or laminated bookmarks to the children as they leave church.
- Organise a shoebox appeal (making sure the deadline is met (often early November))
- Collect for a charity abroad and another closer to home.
- In a parent toddler group or mini service, a dolls house can be used for role play and small toy play. Resources - the traditional Christmas items in the shops can be adapted. - stockings, puppets
- Find out about traditions of families who come from different cultures.
- Organise a 'Treats & Traditions event (see separate pages from website)
- Bake (or buy Christmas gingerbread biscuits to give away (children could decorate them first!)



Christmas Markets on the continent - a wonderful source of beautiful, handcrafted wooden objects and Christmas themed gifts (also good for Godly Play materials). They are very crowded though! Also Lincoln, UK in early December but very crowded.

