



Christmas

is a Christian holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. No one knows the exact date of Christ's birth, but most Christians observe Christmas on December 25. On this day, many go to church, where they take part in special religious services. During the Christmas season, they also exchange gifts and decorate their homes with holly, mistletoe, and Christmas trees. The word *Christmas* comes from *Cristes maesse*, an early English phrase that means *Mass of Christ*.

The story of Christmas comes chiefly from the Gospels of Saint Luke and Saint Matthew in the New Testament. According to Luke, an angel appeared to shepherds outside the town of Bethlehem and told them of Jesus' birth. Matthew tells how the wise men, called *Magi*, followed a bright star that led them to Jesus.

The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. The celebration of this day as Jesus' birth date was probably influenced by *pagan* (unchristian) festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light. Various peoples in northern Europe held festivals in mid-December to celebrate the end of the harvest season. As part of all these celebrations, the people prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving. These customs gradually became part of the Christmas celebration.

In the late 300's, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. By 1100, Christmas had become the most important religious festival in Europe, and Saint Nicholas was a symbol of gift giving in many European countries. During the 1400's and 1500's, many artists painted scenes of the *Nativity*, the birth of Jesus.

The popularity of Christmas grew until the Reformation, a religious movement of the 1500's. This movement gave birth to Protestantism. During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs. During the 1600's, because of these feelings, Christmas was outlawed in England and in parts of the English colonies in America. The old customs of feasting and decorating, however, soon reappeared and blended with the more Christian aspects of the celebration.

In the 1800's, two more Christmas customs became popular—decorating Christmas trees and sending Christmas cards to relatives and friends. Many well-known Christmas carols, including "Silent Night" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," were composed during this period. In the United States and other countries, Santa Claus replaced Saint Nicholas as the symbol of gift giving.

The celebration of Christmas became increasingly important to many kinds of businesses during the 1900's. Today, companies manufacture Christmas ornaments, lights, and other



decorations throughout the year. Other firms grow Christmas trees, holly, and mistletoe. Many stores and other businesses hire extra workers during the Christmas season to handle the increase in sales.

The word *Xmas* is sometimes used instead of Christmas. This tradition began in the early Christian church. In Greek, *X* is the first letter of Christ's name. It was frequently used as a holy symbol.

Christmas around the world

Christmas is the happiest and busiest time of the year for millions of Christians throughout the world. People of different countries celebrate the holiday in various ways, depending on national and local customs.

In the United States and Canada, people decorate their homes with Christmas trees, wreaths, and ornaments. City streets sparkle with colored lights, and the sound of bells and Christmas carols fills the air.

During the weeks before Christmas, children write letters to Santa Claus and tell him what presents they would like to receive. Many department stores hire people to wear a Santa Claus costume and listen to children's requests. People share holiday greetings by sending Christmas cards to relatives and friends. Many companies give presents to their employees.

A Christmas tree is the main attraction in most homes. Relatives and friends may join in trimming the tree with lights, tinsel, and colorful ornaments. Presents are placed under the tree. Many young children believe the presents are brought by Santa Claus, who arrives on Christmas Eve in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Some youngsters hang up stockings so Santa can fill them with candy, fruit, and other small gifts. Families open their presents on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning.

In many parts of the United States and Canada, groups of carolers walk from house to house and sing Christmas songs. Some people give the singers money or small gifts or invite them in for a warm drink.

Many people attend church services on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. Churches are decorated with evergreen branches, red poinsettias, and scenes of the Nativity. Churchgoers listen to readings from the Bible and join in singing Christmas carols.

A traditional Christmas dinner includes stuffed turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and a variety of other dishes. Some families have ham or roast goose instead of turkey. Favorite desserts include mince pie or pumpkin pie, plum pudding, and fruitcake. Eggnog is a popular Christmas beverage in many homes.

In some parts of the United States and Canada, various ethnic groups observe Christmas customs of their ancestors. For example, Spanish traditions are popular in the Southwestern United States. Many families in the province of Quebec follow French customs. Some black Americans combine Christmas with *Kwanzaa*, an African American holiday. *Kwanzaa* lasts seven days, from December 26 through January 1. Each day, families light a candle symbolizing one of seven principles, including creativity, faith, and unity. See *Kwanzaa*.

In England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Many Christmas customs originated in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. These customs include sending Christmas cards and hanging a sprig of mistletoe in a room or hallway. According to tradition, a person may kiss anyone standing under the mistletoe. On Christmas Eve, children hang up stockings for *Father Christmas*, the British version of Santa Claus, to fill with presents. On the afternoon of



Christmas Day, most British families watch their monarch give a special Christmas message on television. In England, dinner on Christmas Day features roast turkey and dessert of mince pie and plum pudding.

During the days before Christmas, children or groups of adults go from house to house singing Christmas carols. Children ask for money for themselves, but adults usually ask for money for charity. This tradition began many years ago, when visitors sang carols in return for a drink from the *wassail bowl*. The bowl contained hot punch made from ale, apples, eggs, sugar, and spices. The word *wassail* comes from *Was haile*, an old Saxon greeting that means *Be healthy*. Today, English people at large parties still drink punch, but it is usually made from wine and other alcoholic beverages, fruit, and spices.

In Ireland, people put a lighted candle in their window on Christmas Eve as a sign of welcome to Mary and Joseph. In Wales, people have caroling contests during the weeks before Christmas. Roast turkey is the main course for dinner. People in Scotland also have roast turkey and exchange small gifts. Some Scottish families decorate a Christmas tree and sing carols, but most hold their main celebrations on New Year's Day.

In France, children put their shoes in front of the fireplace so *Pere Noel* (Father Christmas) can fill them with gifts. Many families attend midnight Mass and then have a festive supper called *Le reveillon*. Large numbers of French families also decorate their homes with small Nativity scenes. In these scenes, clay figures called *santons* (little saints) portray the story of Jesus' birth. Some people put additional santons in their Nativity scenes every year. They buy these figures at special holiday fairs that are held before Christmas.

In Germany, Saint Nicholas visits children's homes on St. Nicholas Eve, December 5, and delivers candy and other sweets to be opened on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. According to one tradition, the *Christkind* (Christ child) sends the gifts on Christmas Eve. This tradition is most popular in the mainly Roman Catholic region of southern Germany. In the northern, mainly Protestant areas, parents usually say the *Weihnachtsmann* (Christmas Man) brings the gifts.

Most German families have a Christmas tree that they decorate with lights, tinsel, and ornaments. Spicy cakes called *lebkuchen* are made in various shapes and used as decorations.

In Spain, people dance and sing in the streets after midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Most Spanish homes and churches display a miniature Nativity scene called a *Nacimiento*. During the evening of January 5, children put their shoes on a balcony or near a window. The next day is Epiphany, the last day of the Christmas season. It celebrates the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. According to legend, the Wise Men arrive during the night before Epiphany and fill the children's shoes with small gifts. See Epiphany.

In the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, according to legend, Saint Nicholas gives presents to children on St. Nicholas Eve, December 5, which they open on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. Wearing a red robe, he arrives on a boat from Spain and rides down the streets on a white horse. His servant, *Swarte Piet* (Black Pete), accompanies him. Saint Nicholas goes down the chimney of each house and leaves gifts in shoes that the children have put by the fireplace.

In Italy, most homes and churches have a *presepio* (Nativity scene). On Christmas Eve, the family prays while the mother places a figure of the *Bambino* (Christ child) in the manger. Many Italians serve eels for dinner on Christmas Eve. They also bake a Christmas bread



called *panettone*, which contains raisins and candied fruit. Italian children receive gifts from *La Befana*, a kindly old witch, on the eve of Epiphany.

In Poland, people attend *Pasterka* (Shepherd's Mass) at midnight on Christmas Eve. Many Polish families follow the Christmas tradition of breaking an *oplatek*, a thin wafer made of wheat flour and water. Nativity scenes are stamped on the *oplatek*. The head of the family holds the wafer, and each person breaks off a small piece and eats it. The Christmas Eve meal features fish, sauerkraut, potato pancakes, and beet soup.

In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Christmas dinner includes rice pudding, called *julgrot*, which has an almond in it. According to tradition, whoever gets the almond will have good luck throughout the new year.

Santa Claus is a familiar figure in the Scandinavian countries. But many children there believe that a lively elf brings them gifts from Santa on Christmas Eve. The Danes and Norwegians call this elf *Julenissen*, and the Swedes refer to him as *Jultomten*.

The Christmas season in Sweden begins on St. Lucia Day, December 13. In the morning of this day, the oldest daughter in the home dresses in white and wears a wreath with seven lighted candles on her head. She serves the other members of the family coffee and buns in bed.

A popular Christmas custom in Norway is *ringe in Julen* (ringing in Christmas). Throughout the country, people ring church bells at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve. In Denmark, people decorate their Christmas tree with small paper cones filled with candy. Children are not allowed to see the tree until Christmas Eve.

In Australia and New Zealand, December comes during the summer. Many people celebrate Christmas by going on a picnic or to the beach. Schoolchildren have a six-week summer vacation at Christmastime. Caroling takes place in many cities and towns. Popular Christmas foods include turkey and plum pudding. Both Father Christmas and Santa Claus are popular symbols of gift giving in Australia and New Zealand.

In Latin America. The nine days before Christmas have special importance in Mexico. These days are called *posadas*, which means *inns* or *lodgings*. On each day, Mexicans reenact Mary and Joseph's search for lodgings on the first Christmas Eve. Two children carrying figures of Mary and Joseph lead a procession of people to a particular house. The people knock on the door and ask for lodgings. They are refused at first but finally are admitted.

After each *posada* ceremony, Mexicans feast and celebrate. Children enjoy trying to break the *piñata*, a brightly decorated paper or clay figure containing candy and small gifts. The *piñata* may be shaped like an animal, an elf, a star, or some other object. It is hung from the ceiling, and the children take turns trying to hit it with a stick while blindfolded. When someone breaks the *piñata*, the gifts and candy fall to the floor, and the children scramble for them.

In Venezuela, people have a late supper after returning from midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Most of these meals include *hallacas*, which are corn-meal pies stuffed with chicken, pork, beef, and spices. A favorite Christmas dish in Argentina is *ninos envueltos* (wrapped children). It consists of rolled beef slices filled with seasoned mincemeat.

Children in some Latin-American countries, including Brazil, Colombia, and parts of Mexico, receive gifts on Christmas Day. In Argentina, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and most areas of Mexico, the wise men leave the presents on the eve of Epiphany.



In Asia. Relatively small numbers of Christians live in the countries of Asia, and so Christmas is not widely celebrated there. In areas where Christmas is observed, people follow such Western customs as attending religious services, giving presents, singing carols, and decorating Christmas trees.

In Japan, Christians are a minority, yet the popular aspects of Christmas are increasingly seen. Gifts are exchanged, lights decorate business districts, and department stores often display Christmas trees. Even Santa Claus makes his appearance in the crowded stores.

In the Philippines, people attend *Misas de Gallo* (Masses of the Cock), which are celebrated early each morning the nine days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Filipinos parade through the streets carrying colorful star-shaped lanterns called *parols*. These lanterns are also displayed in the windows of most homes.

On Christmas Eve, Christians from throughout the world gather for midnight Mass in Bethlehem, the town near Jerusalem where Jesus was born. They kneel to kiss the silver star that is set in the ground at the spot where Jesus' birth is believed to have taken place.

In Africa, as in Asia, the celebration of Christmas is not widespread because most of the countries have a small Christian population. Missionaries brought Christmas customs to Africa and so people in the Christian communities generally follow Western traditions. However, Africans sing carols and hymns in their own languages. In Ethiopia, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church hold religious services on Christmas, January 7. The major celebration takes place nearly two weeks later at Epiphany.

The celebration of Christmas

Religious practices. For most Christians, the Christmas season begins on the Sunday nearest November 30. This date is the feast day of Saint Andrew, one of the 12 apostles of Christ. The nearest Sunday is the first day of *Advent*, a four-week period during which Christians prepare for the celebration of Christmas. The word *advent* means *a coming* and refers to the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day.

Many Christians have an Advent wreath in their homes during the holiday season. Most of these wreaths are made of evergreen or holly branches and may lie on a table. Four candles, one for each Sunday of Advent, are placed among the branches. On the first Sunday, the family lights one candle and joins in prayer. They repeat this ceremony on each Sunday of Advent, lighting one additional candle each time. Three of the candles are purple, and the other one is pink. The pink candle is lit for the first time on the third Sunday, when people celebrate the beginning of the second half of Advent. On Christmas Day, all four candles may be replaced by four white ones, or a white candle may be added in the center. White symbolizes Jesus.

In many countries, people use special Advent calendars or Advent candles to keep track of the 24 days before Christmas. An Advent calendar has a colorful Christmas scene, and each date is printed on a flap. One flap is lifted daily to uncover a holiday picture or a Biblical verse. On an Advent candle, the dates appear in a row down the side. Each evening, the candle is lit and then burned down to the next date. By Christmas Day, the entire candle has melted.

During the Christmas season, many churches display a *creche* (Nativity scene). It shows figures of Mary and Joseph praying over the infant Jesus in the stable. Figures of the Magi, angels, shepherds, and various animals surround the Holy Family.

For many Christians, the Christmas season reaches a climax at midnight Mass or other



religious services on Christmas Eve. Churches are decorated with candles, lights, evergreen branches, and bright red poinsettias. People sing Christmas carols and listen to readings from the Gospels of Saint Luke and Saint Matthew. Priests and ministers speak to the congregations about the coming of Christ and the need for peace and understanding among all people. Most churches also hold services on Christmas Day.

The Christmas season ends on Epiphany, January 6. In Western Christian churches, Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Wise Men to the Christ child. Among Eastern Christians, this day celebrates Jesus' baptism. Epiphany falls on the 12th day after Christmas. The song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" refers to the 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany.

Gift giving. The custom of giving gifts to relatives and friends on a special day in winter probably began in ancient Rome and northern Europe. In these regions, people gave each other small presents as part of their year-end celebrations.

By 1100, Saint Nicholas had become a popular symbol of gift giving in many European countries. According to legend, he brought presents to children on the eve of his feast day, December 6. Nonreligious figures replaced Saint Nicholas in certain countries soon after the Reformation, and December 25 became the day for giving gifts.

Today, Santa Claus brings presents to children in many countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia. A number of other countries have their own versions of Santa Claus, such as Father Christmas in the United Kingdom and Ireland, Pere Noel in France, and Weihnachtsmann in Germany.

Saint Nicholas still brings presents in some countries, including the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, and parts of Germany. Children fill shoes with straw and carrots for his horse and place them in front of the fireplace. By morning, the straw and carrots have been replaced by presents. Youngsters in many Spanish-speaking nations have a similar custom. However, they leave the food for the camels of the Wise Men and put the shoes outside a window on the eve of Epiphany. The Magi place small gifts in the shoes during the night. The custom of hanging stockings by the fireplace probably developed from those traditions.

In some areas of northern Germany, Saint Nicholas's assistant, *Knecht Ruprecht* (Servant Rupert), gives presents to good children. He gives whipping rods to the parents of bad ones. In Sweden, many children receive presents from the elf Jultomten, called Julenissen in Denmark and Norway.

In Italy, La Befana brings presents on the eve of Epiphany. According to legend, the Wise Men asked the kindly old witch to accompany them to see the infant Jesus. She refused, saying she was too busy and had to clean her house, and so she missed the wondrous sight. Each year, La Befana goes from house to house, leaving gifts and looking for the Christ child.

Christmas feasting. The year-end festivities of ancient European peoples included huge feasts, many of which lasted for several days. The preparation of special foods later became an important part of the Christmas celebration throughout the world.

At the first Christmas feasts, people roasted boars, pigs, and peacocks over large open fires. Today, roast turkey is the most popular main course in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, people serve roast goose. Fish is the feature of Christmas Eve dinner in a number of countries. For example, Austrians eat baked carp and Norwegians dine on *lutefisk* (dried cod). Vegetables, relishes, hot breads, and a



variety of other dishes accompany the main course of the Christmas feast everywhere.

Popular beverages served especially at Christmastime include eggnog in the United States and hot, spicy wassail in England. Many people in Sweden drink *glogg*, a hot punch made with spices, liquors, raisins, and nuts.

Favorite Christmas desserts in the United States include fruitcake, mince pie, and pumpkin pie. Plum pudding is traditional in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. The French serve a Christmas cake called *buche de Noel*, which looks like a miniature log. Italians finish their meal with *torrone*, a candy made of egg whites, honey, and nuts. Fruit-filled breads called *stollen* are favorites in Germany. In Mexico and other Latin-American countries, thin, round pastries called *bunuelos* are usually eaten with cinnamon and sugar.

Christmas decorations. The traditional colors of Christmas are green and red. Green represents the continuance of life through the winter and the Christian belief in eternal life through Christ. Red symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed at His Crucifixion. Christmas decorations that feature these colors include the Christmas tree, the Christmas wreath, holly, and mistletoe.

The Christmas tree probably developed in part from the "Paradise Tree." This tree was an evergreen decorated with apples used in a popular play about Adam and Eve held on December 24 in medieval Germany. By 1605, some Germans decorated their homes with evergreens for Christmas. They trimmed the trees with fruits, nuts, lighted candles, and paper roses. Later decorations included painted eggshells, cookies, and candies.

The first Christmas trees in the United States were used in the early 1800's by German settlers in Pennsylvania. During the mid-1800's, the custom of trimming Christmas trees spread rapidly throughout the world. Today, some form of Christmas tree is part of every Christmas celebration. Decorations include tinsel, bright ornaments, and candy canes. A star is mounted on top of many Christmas trees and other Christmas displays. It represents the star that led the wise men to the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

The Christmas wreath, like the evergreens used as Christmas trees, symbolizes the strength of life overcoming the forces of winter. In ancient Rome, people used decorative wreaths as a sign of victory and celebration. The custom of hanging a Christmas wreath on the front door of the home probably came from this practice.

Holly is an evergreen tree with sharply pointed, glossy leaves and red berries. It is used in making Christmas wreaths and other decorations. The needlelike points of the leaves were thought to resemble the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified. The red berries symbolized the drops of blood He shed.

Mistletoe is an evergreen plant with dark leaves and shiny white berries. Ancient Celtic priests considered the plant sacred and gave people sprigs of it to use as charms. The custom of decorating homes with mistletoe probably came from its use as a ceremonial plant by early Europeans. In many countries, a person standing under a sprig of mistletoe may be kissed.

Christmas carols. The word *carol* came from a Greek dance called a *choraulein*, which was accompanied by flute music. The dance later spread throughout Europe and became especially popular with the French, who replaced the flute music with singing. People originally performed carols on several occasions during the year. By the 1600's, carols involved singing only, and Christmas had become the main holiday for these songs.

Most of the carols sung today were originally composed in the 1700's and 1800's. They



include "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." The words of the famous carol "Silent Night" were written on Christmas Eve in 1818 by Joseph Mohr, an Austrian priest. Franz Gruber, the organist of Mohr's church, composed the music that same night, and the carol was sung at midnight Mass. "O Holy Night" was introduced at midnight Mass in 1847. Adolphe Adam, a French composer, wrote the music. Popular nonreligious carols include "Jingle Bells" and "White Christmas."

Christmas cards. The first Christmas card was created in 1843 by John Callcott Horsley, an English illustrator. It resembled a postcard and showed a large family enjoying a Christmas celebration. The message on the card read, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You." About 1,000 of the cards were sold. By 1860, the custom of exchanging Christmas cards had spread throughout the United Kingdom. The first Christmas cards manufactured in the United States were made in 1875 by Louis Prang, a German-born Boston printer.

Other customs. In some countries, especially the United Kingdom, France, and the Scandinavian nations, many families burned a *Yule log* at Christmastime. The log was a large piece of a tree trunk, and people kept an unburned part of it to light the next year's log. Early Europeans believed the unburned wood had magic powers. It was thought that bad luck would follow if the Yule log fire went out. Today, these fires are confined to large public fireplaces, such as those in ski resorts.

Large numbers of people enjoy reading Christmas stories and poems during the holiday season. For example, *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by the English novelist Charles Dickens ranks as one of the most famous tales ever written. The poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (1823), popularly known by its first line, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," is read aloud in many homes on Christmas Eve. Clement Moore, an American scholar, supposedly wrote this poem as a Christmas present for his children. Several musical productions are also Christmas traditions. They include *The Nutcracker*, a ballet by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky of Russia, and *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, an opera by Gian Carlo Menotti of Italy.

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