

A Quick Guide to Christmas

I. Introduction

A festival of light



Christmas is not the most important Christian festival, but it is possibly the most popular and the most widely celebrated by Christians and non - Christians alike. Christians celebrate Christmas on different dates depending on the calendar that the church follows. Protestant and Catholic Christians follow the sixteenth century Gregorian calendar while Orthodox Christians follow the earlier Julian calendar, so not all Christians celebrate Christmas on the same date. Protestant and Catholic churches celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December and Orthodox Christians on January 7th.

Christmas worship, traditions and celebrations differ across the globe. However, the reason for celebrating is the same, to mark the birth of Jesus, who all Christians describe as the Light of the World. It is no surprise then that in the western hemisphere Christmas is celebrated in winter, during the time when the days are the shortest and light is most needed.

Advent

Advent is the beginning of the church year. The word Advent means 'coming', it is derived from a Latin word (a lot of terms in Christianity are derived from Latin and Greek). It begins on the 4th Sunday before Christmas Day (not on the 1st of December as the chocolate Advent calendar producers would have us believe!), so there is no fixed date for Advent. It is an exciting time as Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Some churches are decorated with evergreens and the colour purple is dominant, this is the colour of preparation.

Some churches will have an advent crown or wreath prominently displayed; a circlet of greenery with four candles (and sometimes a white candle in the centre); three of the Advent candles are usually purple and one pink. The light represents Jesus as Light of the world. A candle is lit on each Sunday during Advent and the white central candle on Christmas Eve. Advent is all about preparing for the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, God in human form.



The Christmas Story in the Bible

The birth of Jesus is important to Christians, but what most people recognise as the Christmas story, is made up by putting together extracts from different parts of the Bible. Only two of the four Gospels mention Jesus' birth, Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2. They have some points of agreement, but there are differences in their characters, plots, and they were probably written with different audiences in mind. Matthew presumes that his Jewish audience will know and recognise the fulfilment of prophecies from the Hebrew Bible, linked to the coming of a promised messiah or saviour; Luke is more interested in making sure that his audience knows that Jesus' birth is important for people of all backgrounds and for people from across the world. When these two narratives are combined we have the Christmas story.

2. Setting the scene - the Christmas story

The Christmas story is set in the Middle East, over 2000 years ago. Jesus was born into a Jewish family in the country of Judea, now known as Palestine and Israel. His given name was Yeshua or Jeshua (Jesus is the Greek translation of this name). Jesus was born in about the year 5CE, but nobody knows the exact date. He was born in a town called Bethlehem, also known as the City of David. This connection with David is important as in the Tenach, the Hebrew (Jewish) Bible it states that the messiah will be a descendant of the Jewish King David.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Joseph (not Jesus' father), the man who married his mother Mary, had to travel there to be counted as part of a Roman census - he had been born in Bethlehem, but lived in Nazareth. The Romans conquered Palestine in 63BC. They appointed a Jewish 'puppet king' Herod to govern Palestine, but the Romans were in overall control. So Jesus was born into a country which was occupied and where the people were waiting for a saviour, a messiah to set them free. The Hebrew Bible states that the Jews are God's chosen people (chosen to have certain responsibilities, rather than privileges) and that eventually they will live in 'God's kingdom on earth'. They await a messiah, God's anointed or chosen one, to fulfil God's promise and establish this nation. This hope for a messiah and freedom from Roman oppression, was particularly strong at the time when Jesus was born; the Christmas story suggests that Jesus is the longed for messiah and the fulfilment of prophecy.

3. Time line of the Christmas story

The Christmas story is found in two of the Gospels, in the New Testament part of the Christian Bible, Matthew and Luke. The word Bible means library and the Bible is literally a 'library' of different books combined in a single tome. There are lots of excellent versions of the Christmas story particularly for children and young people, so already lots to choose from. Below is a timeline of the main events of the Christmas narratives.

The Annunciation

Mary is a young Jewish girl engaged to be married to a man called Joseph. She lives in Nazareth in what is now northern Israel. She is visited by an angel who tells her that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph

Joseph was born in Bethlehem which is in modern day Palestine and lived and worked as a carpenter in Nazareth. When Mary tells him the news of the 'immaculate conception', his immediate reaction is to break off the engagement. He is visited by an angel that confirms Mary's story, so he marries her.

The journey

In 5CE the Roman Governor of Judea demands that all men return to their place of birth, the Romans want to carry out a census, which will then be used to level taxes on the Jewish population. Mary is by this time very heavily pregnant, not ideal, for embarking on a ninety-mile journey, on foot, but she accompanies Joseph.

The birth

They arrive in the busy town of Bethlehem only to find that there is absolutely no accommodation. They finally find a cave that is used to shelter animals, a makeshift stable and they are allowed by the owner to sleep with the livestock. It is here that Mary gives birth, just as the angel told her she would, to a healthy baby boy. A king, but born in poverty.



The star

There appears to be a star above the stable marking the place where the child is born.

The shepherds

Shepherds were the outcasts of Jewish society; they couldn't easily keep the Jewish laws or observe Shabbat (the Sabbath) so they are avoided by those who are more

observant; they are visited by angels proclaiming that a very special child has been born. They follow the star and go to welcome the child. This is symbolic of the fact that Jesus came for all members of society, even the very poorest and those who were outcasts.

Magi

Mary, Joseph and Jesus do not immediately return to Nazareth. They find a house to live in and are there for about a year. They have some unexpected visitors from faraway lands who are astronomers, who believe the star in the sky foretells the coming of a king. In their search for this 'King of the Jews' they visit King Herod's palace, who asks them to tell him if they find the new king. When they are in Bethlehem they leave the baby three gifts: gold (for a king), frankincense (for sweetness and a good life) and myrrh for sad times, suffering and death. They are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod's palace, so they return to their own lands by a different route. The magi are symbolic of the fact that Jesus came for all the people of the world.

Herod

Herod is worried that a new king has been born who might have a claim to his throne. He sends soldiers to kill all the baby boys in the area where Jesus was born; this is known as 'the murder of the innocents'.

Refugees in a strange land

Alerted by the magi and warned in a dream of Herod's intentions Mary, Joseph and Jesus leave Bethlehem and make their way to neighbouring Egypt as refugees. They seek asylum here from Herod and only return to Judea once Herod has died and it is safe for them to do so.

Home to Nazareth

The family return to Nazareth where Jesus like Joseph becomes a carpenter and Mary and Joseph have more children. Jesus stays in the area until he is about 30 years old, at which point his ministry starts.

4. Christmas at the Cathedral

The preparation for Christmas at Bradford's Anglican Cathedral, begins the 1st Sunday of Advent which is the 4th Sunday before Christmas Day. Advent is the beginning of the Church year.

A large star is placed on the Cathedral's steeple, which shines out across the City. The Cathedral is decked in purple, the colour for anticipation and preparation.

An Advent crown is placed near the chancel steps and the first candle is lit during the Sunday morning service; the others will be lit on the following Sundays and the final one on Christmas Eve.

Usually the Cathedral has two nativity scenes that are on display from the 1st Sunday in Advent, one by the State Gate entrance to the Cathedral and one in the Lady Chapel.



The crib in each instance remains empty until after midnight on Christmas Eve, when at Midnight Mass the baby is placed in the manger.

Carol concerts are held throughout Advent; the City carol concert is particularly popular.

Carols are a form of musical worship that usually retell aspects of the Christmas story and proclaim its importance. A Carol Concert with Nine Readings (from the New Testament books which tell the Christmas story) is also a highlight of Advent worship and traditions at the Cathedral.

The Cathedral also holds a Christingle service for younger members of the congregation. A Christingle is a symbolic object used in the Advent services of many Christian denominations. Christingle is a word of German origin, 'Christkindl' means 'Little Christ Child'. This service celebrates Jesus Christ as the 'Light of the World'. The custom of Christingles comes from the Moravian church and since then has become a part of how many churches mark the season (though Christingle services may take place before or after Christmas). Its success stems from The Children's Society who encourage Christingle services as opportunities for 'giving' to children who may need help. What the Christingle Means:

- The lit candle represents Jesus being light in the world
- The orange represents the world
- The red ribbon represents the blood of Christ
- The sweets represent all of God's creations



Christmas begins properly with Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. This is a special service and as such is the first communion service of the Christmas season. By having a service at this time Christians are sharing in the anticipation of the joy of Christmas and celebrating its message of good news by stepping outside the usual tradition of daytime services. The service normally contains carols, a short talk, and the sharing of bread and wine in an act of Holy Communion. Many Christian churches, though not all, hold a service at this time on Christmas Eve. A service of Holy Communion may also be held earlier in the evening, any time after sundown.

At this point the purple colours adorning the Cathedral will be replaced with gold and white; the liturgical colours of festival and joyous celebration.

On Christmas Day Holy Communion is held in the morning and it's a joyous time giving thanks for the birth of Jesus.

The coming of the Magi is celebrated on the 6th January (in some churches the Magi and their gifts are only added to the crib scene on this day). The day has a special name, Epiphany.

The Christmas season goes on in the Cathedral until February 2nd, 40 days after Christmas. Candlemas is the day that marks Jesus being taken to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to be blessed and Mary's return to the place of worship 40 days after the birth of her child (as is traditional in Jewish practice).



The Cathedral does have a splendid Christmas tree on display from Advent through until Epiphany; however, this is a German Pagan, not a Christian, tradition, famously made popular by Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria in the 19th century. Decorated with lights the tree now reminds Christians of Jesus as the Light of the World. However, it is a popular secular, cultural Christmas tradition to have beautifully decorated evergreen trees in homes and public spaces during the Christmas period.

5. Christmas around the World

Christianity is very much a world faith and Christmas traditions vary around the world, All the traditions however have a common theme, hope, light conquering darkness and the need to proclaim 'Immanuel' - 'God is with us!' Many countries have developed secular and cultural traditions that have become associated with Christmas over the years. A really good source of information about these

may be found on this website: <https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/>

There is a selection of useful clips about children celebrating Christmas across Europe, on the BBC Newsround website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/15790210>

Christmas traditions in the UK include:

- Advent calendars – counting down the days until Christmas Day.
- Christmas cards – sent to friends and relatives.
- Decorating one's home with holly, ivy, lights and of course a Christmas tree!
- Nativity scenes.
- Christmas Carols.
- Traditional nativity plays.
- 'Mummers' plays'. These are plays in which a number of characters perform, two of whom engage in a combat, the loser is revived by a doctor character. Modern day pantomimes (also a tradition at Christmas) may be a development of the mummers plays.
- Sharing food with family and friends – Christmas cake and Christmas puddings are traditional fayre – particularly on Christmas Day.
- Exchanging presents on Christmas Day.
- Father Christmas.
- For Christians, worship as part of a congregation on Christmas Eve and/or Christmas morning.
- Charity and service; giving to those less fortunate than oneself.

This website gives a good brief description of the history and background to some of the key UK Christmas traditions: <https://www.countryfile.com/go-outdoors/days-out/top-10-quirky-christmas-traditions/>

6. Frequently asked questions

Q: Is it possible to re-enact the Christmas story?

A: Christian tradition means that the re telling of the Christmas story through role play and drama is acceptable. The nativity is a central part of the Christian tradition in many countries. However Muslim children should not be asked to represent any prophet through role play or drama (Jesus is the Muslim Prophet Isa) and Jewish children may also not wish to take part in such activities. Always check with parents that they are happy for children to be involved.

Q: Do Jews accept that Jesus was the Messiah.

A: No. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish and they became known as Christians sometime in the first century CE. The name Christian comes from the Greek word for Messiah which is Christos, Christ. There are some Messianic Jews (ethnic Jews who are Christians), but they are very small in number.

Q: Do Christians worship Jesus.

A: Yes. Christians believe that Jesus is God in human form, or God incarnate.

He is part of the Trinity, the three facets of God: God the **Father**, Judge, Ruler. King, Creator; God the **Son**, Teacher, Healer, Saviour; God the **Holy Spirit**, God's unseen, constant power at work in the world. This is a very difficult concept. Think of water, it can be experienced and exist in liquid form, as vapour (steam) or solid (ice); it is still the same unchanged thing. The Christian view of God is that it is possible to experience the same transcendence differently; God is always one and the same, always constant, but may be experienced in different forms; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Q: Why do Christians worship on a Sunday and not on the same day as the Jewish Sabbath?

A: God commanded that Jews should rest on the seventh day 'Observe the Sabbath day and keep it Holy' (Holy means separate from the ordinary and mundane). The first Christians kept the Jewish Sabbath and also Sunday, they expected Jesus to return again in their lifetime and as he had risen on a Sunday, they expected that this would be the day of his return. On this day they shared bread and wine as Jesus had commanded. As Christianity in the first century CE became a distinct religion, keeping the Sabbath on a Sunday made a distinction between the Jewish people and the followers of Jesus, Christians.

Q: If no one knows when Jesus was born why do Christians celebrate his birth on the 25th December or 7th January?

A: The 25th is near to the Midwinter Solstice, the shortest day in the Western hemisphere. In pre Christian times across Europe people celebrated at this time of year, bringing lights and evergreen plants into their homes; symbols of hope that the darkness and cold of winter would be replaced by the hope, sunlight and warmth of the spring. There are lots of Pagan customs that have been subsumed into Christian traditions, particularly at festival times. The early church adapted Pagan customs to fit the new Christian beliefs, hiding their original meanings and giving them new ones. We can thank the Romans and Celts for most of our modern-day Christmas traditions. The festival of Saturnalia for example was an ancient Pagan holiday which honoured the Roman God Saturn and took place every year between the 17th and 24th December. This was basically a week of eating, drinking and giving presents. Sound familiar?

