

## The Origins of Christmas



Luke 2:1 "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered."

Tonight, around the world, almost two and a half billion Christians will be celebrating Christmas. The stories of Jesus' birth are the source of the world's most widely observed religious holiday. Almost twice as many Christians are celebrating Christmas this year as there are in the next largest religion, which is Islam. Indeed, more Christians celebrate this feast than any of the other Christian holidays, including Easter Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection. Moreover, because of the cultural and commercial importance of this holiday in Western society and beyond, Christmas is observed by a huge number of

non-Christians as well. For example, there are widespread Christmas celebrations in India, a country where Christians represent less than 3% of the population, and yet Christmas is a national holiday there! Indeed, no other religious festival in all the world is so widely commemorated by individuals who are outside of the religious tradition that originated it. So, what exactly are we all celebrating tonight? What are we doing for Christmas, and why are we doing it? And how much of it has got anything to do with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem centuries ago?

Indeed, Christmas is not an ancient celebration of the Christian Church. There seems to have been little interest in Jesus' birth in the New Testament. Only the first chapters of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew give us any details at all about Jesus' birth or childhood, and there isn't much agreement in their stories between themselves, while there is some significant disagreement. Hardly anything further is mentioned about Jesus' birth, or birthplace, or even his parents' names, anywhere else in the Bible, not in the rest of the Gospels, or the numerous letters of St. Paul, who tells us that Jesus 'was born of a woman'! That's about it, and I am not sure what the alternative is? Nothing further is mentioned in the letters of St. John, or Peter, or James or Jude or the letter to the Hebrews, or the book of Acts or Revelation. And there is no record in the Church of the birth of Jesus being celebrated at

all until about 400 years after the actual event, and it didn't become a major Christian celebration for another 500 years!

Christmas does not even appear on the lists of Christian festivals given by the early Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus or Tertullian. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity, there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of holy martyrs and apostles and Jesus. Numerous Church Fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays when, in fact, saints and martyrs should be honored on the days of their death – their true “birthdays,” in the eyes of the Church.

Moreover, there is absolutely no historical tradition whatsoever that Jesus was actually born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. Indeed, Biblical scholars are almost unanimous in declaring that Jesus was actually born sometime in the spring. So why on earth are we celebrating Christmas tonight?

Well, our ancient forebears, as you probably know, marked the movements of the stars and planets with great precision, and they marked the changes of the seasons with important celebrations. And perhaps THE most important seasonal celebration of them all was the Winter Solstice, when in the Northern Hemisphere at least, the earth which had been moving away from the sun since the summer, causing the days to be shorter and shorter, and colder and colder, the earth finally

begins to move back towards the sun. So, our ancient forebears marked with great celebration that day when the sun began to return, leading inevitably to Spring and to new life. The ancient Roman festival was called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, or 'the birthday of the invincible Sun,' a festive pagan celebration of the Winter solstice, of the return of longer days and warmer seasons! And Christians in the fourth century when the Church became legally recognized for the first time in the Roman Empire, and then was later established as the official religion of the Empire, simply took over the Yuletide celebrations, substituting Jesus' birthday for the Winter Solstice, marking Jesus as the invincible Son, and thus was born the Feast of Christmas, almost 400 years after Jesus' death. Yet even so, there was no exchange of gifts in that celebration, no Christmas trees, or turkey dinners, or visits from St. Nicholas. All those traditions came later, much, much later.

Christmas, even once it appeared on the Church calendar, was not a particularly large or significant festival until many centuries later. Yes, Christmas was the liturgical celebration of Jesus' birth, but it was not generally celebrated religiously any more than any of the other Major Feasts of Our Lord that on the Church calendar --- and that most of us tend to ignore --- like the Feast of the Annunciation, or the Presentation, or the Transfiguration, or the Ascension. In the Middle Ages, there

might be a Mass on Christmas Day celebrated in Church, but the other traditions we now associate with Christmas came later. Christmas was just a Mass for Christ marking his birth, thus its name in English. For instance, it was St. Francis of Assisi, 1200 years after the birth of Jesus, who first introduced, the idea of a crèche, a nativity scene that has become so much a part of our Christmas tradition today that there is now a Nativity scene in almost every church, home, or village green. Even so in 17th century England, some groups such as the Puritans strongly condemned such celebrations of Christmas, considering them to be Catholic inventions. After the English Civil War, Christmas celebrations were actually banned in England in 1647, only to be reinstated in 1660 with the Restoration of King Charles II. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as literacy rates improved among the people, congregational singing was on the rise at such festivals, and many new songs were written for the winter season and its celebration. Indeed, Christmas Carols are called 'carols' and not 'hymns,' because at first, they were considered too pagan or too pedestrian, songs unworthy of being sung in the church. The Christmas tree was not introduced into England until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the English Royal Family, who were of German descent, brought over the practice, especially favored by Prince Albert, though Queen Charlotte's use actually predated his. For back in the Middle

Ages, local towns in Germany would put on a Christmas pageant during the winter holidays, one that usually rehearsed the whole history of God's salvation, from the Garden of Eden to the present day, and one where the evergreen stood in the center of the town square as a symbol of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. This tree of everlasting life soon became synonymous with Jesus' birth at the Winter Solstice, and now nearly every home, and church, and local institution erects a Christmas tree at this time of year!

The modern figure of Santa, who is so important to this season, is based on Medieval folklore traditions surrounding the real Saint Nicholas of Myra, in modern-day Turkey. The bones of Saint Nicholas were removed from their resting place in Turkey after the invasion of the Moslem Turks, and were taken by Venetian sailors during the First Crusade and placed in Venice, where a church to St. Nicholas, the now patron saint of sailors, was built. St. Nicholas was widely venerated thereafter in Europe, though it was the new Protestants that tied St. Nick to Christmas. The custom of giving gifts to children on St. Nicholas' Day, December 6<sup>th</sup>, was transferred by Martin Luther to Christmas Day, as Luther wanted to focus the interest of the children on Jesus instead on the veneration of saints. Henry VIII in England did much the same in the 16th century, where Saint Nicholas became 'Father Christmas'.

But perhaps the most significant cultural contribution to our customs at Christmas result from Charles Dickens' wonderful story of *The Christmas Carol*, written at the very time that Christmas began to take on more and more importance as a Christian celebration, as new traditions became more and more prevalent, like Christmas trees, or getting Christmas day off from the factory, or having a meal with your family, all in addition to going to the Christ Mass. And Dickens stressed certain new themes in his story about Christmas, themes which Jesus would have loved, like care for the needy, in a day when Victorian Prisons and Poor Houses flourished, or care for the sick and suffering, like little Tiny Tim, or our love of money, where our selfish deeds form a chain, link by link, like the one that Ebenezer Scrooge was to wear in the afterlife, or the promoting of the exchange of gifts as a simple measure of our love and concern for one another, for our fellow workers, our friends, our family. But finally, of course, Dicken's story is best remembered and beloved for creating a marvelous Christmas tale of salvation, the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge, the meanest old man in the whole wide world!

Those eternal themes of Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" are now so fundamental to us all and to this celebration, that they are universally honored by so many other people at this time of year as the underlying spiritual teachings of this season, well

beyond faithful Christians observing some religious birthday. Most Christmas movies and most Christmas stories, in the end, are not even about Jesus, but are about those timeless themes inspired by his life, themes like care for the poor, or the sick and suffering, for family and friends, for kindness and for redemption. That in the end is what Christmas is all about. Themes which we see reflected in our own lives and in our own human struggles, because in the face of that baby lying in a manger, we can see our own reflection! So indeed, as Tiny Tim says at the end of the story, may God bless us everyone! AMEN.