

Who is Santa Claus?

Brothers and sisters, asking “who is Santa?” might seem to be a bit of an obvious question!

Everybody knows Santa is the jolly old guy with a bushy white beard in a red suit from the North Pole. On Christmas Eve he flies around the world in his sleigh, pulled by flying reindeer, to deliver Christmas presents for all the good girls and boys who are on the “nice” side of his “naughty or nice” list.

And the children who are on the “naughty” side of his list only get a lump of coal in their stocking – or nothing at all.

And somehow Santa manages to stop at every home that evening, come down the chimney – even if you don’t have one – putting gifts in the stockings hung on the fireplace and leaving presents under the tree, and he likes it very much when you leave him a plate of cookies and a glass of milk.

And we all know these things about Santa Claus because he is an integral part of our popular culture.

Parents start to tell their children about Santa at an early age, as their parents did for them. They encourage them to write a letters to Santa asking him to bring them what they want for Christmas. They take them to go see Santa at the mall – to sit on his knee and tell him if they have been good, and what they want to get for Christmas, and have their picture taken with him.

And there are parades for Santa, there are TV specials about Santa, there are movies about Santa, there are songs about Santa... even the military plays along with this. On Dec 24th the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) makes use of its satellite surveillance system to track Santa Claus and update children around the world on how Santa’s trip is progressing.

So for millions of people in North America and around the world, Santa Claus is an important integral part of our culture

because He embodies the spirit of generosity, of being kind and gracious towards everyone, and he makes us believe, even if it's only for a few days, that it is possible for people to show their better side and that there is some good still left in this world.

So - while the reason for celebrating Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ – it is Santa Claus who has become the exemplar, or the ambassador, of the Christmas season. Everything that celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ is supposed to mean for us in practical terms - has become embodied in Santa Claus.

And so the question now becomes “how did this come about?” And to find the answer to that question we need to travel back in time, back to the year 275 A.D. – to the time when the early church was still debating if it actually should celebrate the birth of Christ, and on which date that ought to take place. And it's rather ironic that it was during this time, of Christmas uncertainty, that the man who would eventually become ‘the Santa Claus who embodies Christmas’, was born.

The life of St. Nicolas begins around 275 A.D. in a small town along the Turkish coast of the Mediterranean Sea called Patara.

Nicolas was born into a wealthy Christian family, and was brought up in the faith and the ways of the Lord. He had a natural inclination towards generosity and kindness and a notable depth of spirit and a devout love of God.

So It was no surprise to anyone that when Nicolas became a young man, that he trained to become a priest and served the Church in Patara for a number of years.

What was more surprising however - was when he moved to the nearby larger city of Myra and offered himself to the service of the church there – that the ruling elders promptly made him their bishop, a position that was normally reserved for those far older than he was.

But it proved to be a good choice, because the recent years of warfare between the Roman armies and Barbarian invaders

had ravaged the countryside and decreased the population making it very difficult for many people to make a living.

Bishop Nicolas quickly distinguished himself with his efforts to take care of the many poor and needy people who had come to Myra looking for a better situation than what they had left in the surrounding countryside.

And, shortly after Nicolas became Bishop of Myra, the Emperor Diocletian began to blame the Christians for difficulties the Empire was facing – accusing them of weakening the Roman gods ability to bless the empire – and a period of great persecution began.

Over the next ten years, Nicolas along with many other Christians were thrown into prison, beaten and tortured in an attempt to convert them back to paganism. Their churches and holy books were destroyed, their property confiscated and many lost their lives or the lives of those close to them. But somehow, by the grace of God, Nicolas survived – perhaps spending up to ten years in prison during this time, and in the

aftermath of this great persecution from 313 A.D. until his death on December 6th somewhere between 348-353 A.D., he was instrumental in helping rebuild the Church in Myra and continuing the work in caring for the poor and the needy.

So it is quite evident from the historical records that Bishop Nicolas was a very godly man, an exemplar of the Christian faith in both doctrine and service, who was willing to serve others humbly and put his life at risk to stay faithful to Christ. He was not in it for the money, or for fame, or for power or influence, and the way he lived his life in devotion to Christ and the Church touched the lives of many people and inspired them.

So much so that the stories about his life and works continued to be told long after his passing, and approximately 450 years later, in the early 800's - they caught the attention of a monastic scholar named Michael the Archimandrite, who compiled these stories into a biography simply entitled "The Life of St. Nicolas."

Now there are three stories from this biography which best characterize St. Nicolas;

One takes place in the time following the great persecution when a severe famine had overtaken the land around the city of Myra. Bishop Nicolas had heard there were grain ships that were making a stop-over in the port on their way to deliver their cargo to Constantinople. Nicolas goes and beseeches the captains of these ships to give the people of Myra and the surrounding area grain to relieve their starvation. At first the captains are reluctant because they must give an account for all of their cargo when they arrive at their destination – but Nicolas assures them in Jesus’ name that they will not get in trouble – and so the captains give the city enough grain to eat and have some to plant in the spring.

Another story has Bishop Nicolas learning that three innocent citizens are about to be executed, he quickly rushes to the scene and forestalls the executioners sword just in time and then confronts the magistrate who ordered the exaction, who then confesses to having been corrupted by bribery. This takes

place while three generals from Constantinople are visiting the region to deal with some insurrection. Upon returning to Constantinople they are falsely charged with treason and sentenced to die. While spending the night in prison they decide to pray and ask for the spirit of the Bishop Nicolas to intervene for them. That night both the Emperor and the jailer are confronted by Bishop Nicolas in a dream telling them that the generals are innocent and so the following morning the Emperor releases them.

And the third and most famous story occurs in when Nicolas was younger, and his parents have recently died leaving him with all their wealth. Nicolas learns of another family in town who has become destitute and the father is planning to sell the three daughters into circumstances that will be less than honorable or God-honoring because he has no money to provide as a dowry in order for them to be married off. So Nicolas is reported to have secretly thrown a bag of gold in through their window enabling the father to arrange a marriage for his first daughter. Upon seeing the success of his charity, he does this two more times so that all three

daughters are able to be married and the state of the family is saved.

Now with stories such as these and a few others, it didn't take long for copies of this biography to make their way all across the empire – first to the east into Syria and Palestine and Egypt, and then westward to Italy and into western Europe, and eventually all the way to the British Isles.

And wherever these stories travelled they seemed to continue to touch people. Even though Nicolas was only a regional bishop in Myra, with no significant work or influence in church life outside that region – wherever his stories were circulated, it wasn't long before churches, ministries, and holy relics dedicated in honor of his name soon emerged.

And when the Life of St. Nicolas was been translated from Greek into Latin – St. Nicolas began to appear as the hero in many common folk tales, plays, songs and paintings in the West, and during the 900's, the church in Germany developed a special church service to celebrate his life.

St. Nicolas' popularity also spread to Russia. When Prince Vladimir became a Christian in 988 A.D. he received some gifts from the Emperor of Constantinople, among them were Icons and relics of St. Nicolas along with a copy of the Life of St. Nicolas.

As the Christian faith spread throughout Russia, St. Nicolas became so popular that he was named the co-patron Saint of Russia along with St. Andrew (the disciple) and Mary the Mother of our Lord.

This devotion and veneration of St. Nicolas even inspired the citizens of the Italian city of Bari in 1087 A.D. to launch an expedition to Myra, where a group of 47 armed sailors went to rescue the remains of St. Nicolas' and bring them back to their city, because Myra had fallen under Muslim rule.

Once St. Nicolas' remains had been entombed in Bari, and consecrated by the Pope – pilgrims from all over Western Europe and Russia began to flock to Bari to pay their respects

and show their devotion to the beloved St. Nicolas, and celebrate his feast day on December 6th.

And it's really kind of amazing isn't it – how the stories about a humble and unassuming bishop captivated the hearts of so many people across Christendom. And really it's because in the person of St. Nicolas many believers saw someone who embodied spiritual care, a concern for justice and material welfare, whose name they believed they could invoke for help in these areas.

So how did this St. Nicolas turn into Santa Claus? Well it's not hard to see the similarities between them in terms of being generous and kind and caring and giving presents to everyone, and how his advocacy for the unjustly accused has become the knowledge of who has been naughty or nice and his concern for those who are poor and vulnerable has become a focus on children.

But the rest of the transformation occurred as the European Church continued to develop a variety of traditions to

celebrate of St. Nicolas' day; such as St. Nicolas travelling around on a horse to come and visit all the children, the children leaving out shoes with straw for St. Nicolas' horse, St. Nicolas inquiring with their parents about the children's behavior, and the giving of gifts and treats and food to the children, along with some stern advice to be good.

And the association of the St. Nicolas's traditions with the celebration of Christmas came about on two fronts.

First it was encouraged by the Church as a means by which to help make the Christmas services of honoring the birth of Christ into a truly popular festival which would gain the hearts of the people as the old pagan festivals had.

Second, when the Protestant Reformation occurred, the veneration, worship and celebration of Saints was prohibited in the Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist Churches – and so the practices associated with St. Nicolas day remained and were attributed to baby Jesus - while the name of the Saint was removed.

Eventually these St. Nicolas / Christmas day Catholic and Protestant traditions eventually found their way over to America with the German and Dutch immigrants in the 1770's but they stayed largely within those immigrant communities at first.

It wasn't until the New York Historical Society adopted St. Nicolas as its patron Saint in 1810 to recognize New York City's Dutch roots, that the practice of Christmas gift giving began to spread - and American's were introduced to St. Nicolas, or Sinterklaas in Dutch – becoming Santa Claus in English.

Then in 1822, Clement Clarke Moore – an Episcopal Bishop in New York and Professor at General Theological Seminary – wrote that famous poem “The Night before Christmas” originally known as “A Visit from St. Nicolas”

When this poem was published, it became an instant classic and is responsible for establishing the basic American traditions we have come to associate with Santa Clause, such as driving a flying sleigh full of toys pulled by Reindeer,

entering the house through the chimney, laying his finger to his nose to go back up the chimney, his giving us a description of St. Nicolas as a jolly old elf – with twinkling eyes, reddish cheeks and nose, a white beard – and a pipe...

The transformation continued when artist Thomas Nast was asked to illustrate this poem. So working from this basic description in Moore's poem Nast produced a Santa Claus that was very different from the traditional religious image of St. Nicolas. (*reasons were for political satire*)

Nast also worked for a magazine with national distribution, so each December edition of Harper's Weekly would feature a new illustration of his Santa Claus. It would be Nast who was responsible for developing the ideas of Santa and his workshop, the naughty and nice list, and that Santa lived at the North Pole.

So, by the turn of the century St. Nicolas the Bishop of Myra, had essentially been transformed into the American Santa Claus – and in 1931 an illustrator for the Coca-Cola Company,

Haddon Sundblom, finalized the image of Santa that we are most familiar with today.

But something curious happened in the transformation of St. Nicolas into Santa Claus – in the thousand year period between 800's when the Life of St. Nicolas was written and the 1800's when New York Historical Society acknowledged him as their patron saint – no one ever wondered if St. Nicolas was real? No one questioned if he really had existed and if he was truly able to assist those who sought his help.

Sure, maybe a lot of the stories that eventually grew up around his legend were a bit fantastic – but that was just embellishment to the historical reality of his Saintly life which was never in question, and was to inspire you to do the same.

But when St. Nicolas was transformed into the American Santa Claus, he was completely cut off from his historical roots. He may have retained his virtues and values, but in truth he became a mythical figure of benevolence more akin to a fairy-tale than a real-life Saint.

And the irony in this was that the very people, the children of the poor whom St. Nicolas would have served – did not get visited by Santa Claus... their families could not afford to participate in these Christmas celebrations.

So began the debate on the existence of Santa Claus between those who believed he was real because they received his presents and those who did not.

And in 1897 a young girl named Virginia O'Hanlon decided that it was time seek an authoritative opinion on the matter and she wrote to the New York Sun newspaper asking *"Please tell me the truth... is there a Santa Claus?"*

In a further twist of irony, her letter was answered by a fellow with the last name Church, and I find his editorial to be a very insightful reflection of how many leaders in the actual Church at the time were dealing with how not only St. Nicolas – but the Christian faith seemed to have been cut off from its historic roots by the Enlightenment and the scientific

revolution – and people were struggling to find a basis upon which to be able to believe and have faith.

Here's some important segments; Church writes *"Yes Virginia there is a Santa Claus, he exists as surely as love and generosity and devotion exists... how dreary the world would be if there were no Santa Claus... you could hire a hundred men to watch the chimneys on Christmas eve... but even if you did not see Santa coming down what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in this world are those which people cannot see... only faith, poetry, love, romance can push aside the curtain and view the glory beyond... No Santa Claus! Thank God he lives and lives forever.... And 10 times 10,000 years from now he will continue to make the heart of childhood glad."*

Brothers and sisters this is the most eloquent – and thus deceptive - expression I have ever come across justifying the validity of having faith and belief by basing them upon your own internal convictions.

Essentially what Church says is that if Santa is real to you and makes this world a place of wonder then who can prove that wrong for you. Because what is most real are the intangible things like love and goodness – that's what really counts.

So it doesn't matter if there is no physical proof – what does faith need to have to do with physical proof anyways right?

And this is essentially the same answer and advice which the mainline Churches in North America began to preach to their congregants – that the most important thing about Christianity was not certainty of historical facts and figures like St. Nicolas, or Jesus Christ – but rather it was intangible qualities like love, and giving, and sharing, and being kind towards everyone.

So, brothers and sisters, that is how we have come to the point and time in our culture where celebrating the birth of Christ might be reason for the season... but it's the mythical, unhistorical, fairy-tale of Santa Claus who now embodies for us everything that Christ's birth is supposed to be about.

And there are two problems with this situation that we ought to be aware of as Christians.

Firstly, when being kind and generous towards others becomes the responsibility of a mythical Santa, in whom we can idealize what generosity and giving ought to look like – it has the unintended effect of relieving us of working out that responsibility in a Christian manner like St. Nicolas did.

In the myth of Santa he visits ALL the boys and girls to give them what they asked for... but in reality he only visits the boys and girls whose families can afford to buy them gifts.

A mythical figure like Santa should not be the one who embodies the reality of what Christ's birth means – it should be real flesh and blood Christians, like you and I – encouraged by the example of those who have gone before us like St. Nicolas – who are giving and being generous and kind.

So whenever you see Santa Claus depicted in our Christmas celebrations being generous and kind – be reminded that in

reality... Santa Claus helps no one – that is our Christian responsibility and we need get out there and fulfill it.

Secondly, we need to understand that the real issue or the underlying problem with the American Santa Claus is not about consumerism, or that his sleigh and reindeer frequently block the view of Jesus in the manger...

The real issue with Santa Claus... is about what it means to be able to have faith and beliefs and how that is possible. Belief in Santa Claus does not need to rest on facts or reality but on one's personal feelings or experiences because that is where the reality of things like love and kindness dwell – and that is what faith and belief are really all about and that's how we can say it is real, when for all appearances it is not.

It's also the way in which a particular belief or faith can be true for me, but it doesn't necessarily need to be true for you – because who is to say what will or won't give you that experience of love and kindness and so on.

And the problem is that this has become so pervasive in our society since the 1800's that it has become the default way in which people have faith and beliefs – and it even affects how Christians set-up believing in Jesus and being a Christian.

I hear people who are Christians saying *“Jesus is real for me and I believe in him, but that doesn't mean he has to be real for somebody else, unless they want him to be – what's most important is how he is about love and kindness and so on...”*

Friends that's Santa Claus faith – that's not Christian faith...

If St. Nicolas had Santa Claus faith instead of the Christian faith he would not have faced persecution from the Romans because he could have simply kept his beliefs private – and done whatever pagan ritual to some mythical god that they required of him, justifying it by saying – what's most important is love and kindness and if this is what they believe will bring the empire happiness then I'll go along with it.

But St. Nicolas was obstinate and refused to compromise the facts of his Christian faith - and he was persecuted for it.

So brothers and sisters, whenever you see Santa Claus this Christmas – may he remind about faith, and what it means to have faith, and may you be encouraged to reclaim your Christian faith...

Not so much in terms of the content and doctrine, though that is important – but through consciously rejecting the lie that what is most important about faith and what makes faith faith is love and kindness and peace that you feel internally,

Instead confess your faith, rest it upon the historic reality that we are celebrating – and say instead - that the most important things are actually the birth of Jesus Christ, his life and his death and his resurrection and his ascension into heaven and his anticipated return.

Amen.