

# CHRISTMAS – SYMBOLS AND TRADITIONS

## Understanding our Australian Christmas



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## FORWARD

Christmas is one of the busiest, and for many Australians, the most joyous and family focused times of the year. It is traditionally the one occasion in the year that brings families together. Aunts, uncles and cousins along with Grandpa and Nana visit and Christmas Day turns into a long feast and celebration with anxious children waiting for gifts.

For the majority of Australians, our Christmas has all the glitter, tinsel and feeling of a Christmas in London, Paris or New York. The major difference is the weather. Christmas in Australia is never white. Snow has rarely, if ever, fallen in December. We might have experienced an array of seasonal variations from thunder storms, floods, hailstorms, cyclones and bushfires, but most of the time we are blessed with blue skies and warm temperatures..

Christmas is special to the majority of Australians because it is our Summer Holiday season. For a lot of young Australians, this means sun, surf, shopping and a long holiday from work and school.

Our celebration of Christmas is unique. We take in many of the old world traditions, but we are a new world country. We combine much of European, English and American tradition into a unique Australian style of Christmas. We have a population of just over 22 million people and European people have been here for just over 200 years. Our country is a harmonious mix of many ethnic groups. Our backgrounds are varied, with people coming from places far away such as England, Scotland, Ireland, Northern Europe, Italy, Greece, Spain, France, Middle East, Vietnam, China, Japan, Thailand as well as North and South America.

So you can imagine that each of these national groups brings their own flavour and rituals of the Christmas celebrated in their respective homelands. As Australians we are able to appreciate a culturally diverse set of Christmas celebrations, although many of our Christmas celebrations are heavily influenced by our original Anglo-Celtic heritage. The English style of Christmas has served as our model for celebrating Christmas - right down to the traditional roast turkey and steamed pudding on a day which may have had a temperature of over 35 degrees centigrade.

As Christmas approaches, we all begin to get ready for the "silly season". Everyone is busily planning Christmas break-up parties. Children are writing letters to Santa Claus. Decorations are bought and set up. Shopping centres and malls are experiencing record breaking crowds. In homes, children are helping to decorate the family Christmas tree. They are also learning Christmas Carols so that they may be sung at occasions such as public "Carols by Candlelight" and school concerts. Christmas stockings are being hung in homes, although fireplaces are pretty much in short supply. Cards galore are being written and posted. Everyone awaits; the anticipation is high!

Even if we are not Christian, we understand Christmas as a time for remembering its true meaning - the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas is really a celebration of the 'Christ Mass'. This is very much a Christian event. The central point of Christian theology is that Jesus is the Son of God and he came to the world to bring us into a relationship with God.

Many Christians will attend church service – either a mid-night service on Christmas Eve, or a morning service on Christmas Day. Seventy percent of Australians claim to be Christian; mostly Catholic, Anglican or Protestant.

There is little sleep on Christmas Eve and on Christmas morning, families with little children will be awake before dawn as they excitedly look for presents left by Santa. . Gifts are unwrapped and the joy of Christmas begins. For those with relatives and friends overseas, there is a mad scramble to get an early phone call to relatives worldwide. Then there comes the busy preparation to get a meal ready before the relatives arrive.

Inherent in these celebrations and family events are many traditions and symbols of the festive season. We follow them, even if we don't understand their origins. We put up a Christmas Tree and we decorate it with ornaments and tinsel. We put stockings on the mantelpiece (if we have one). Our kids eagerly wait for Santa and his presents and we sing carols and Christmas songs. Why do we do this? Probably, you'll answer this question by saying "Because we always have!" Perhaps you have never thought about the meaning of many of these Christmas symbols or traditions. Even those with a strong Christian faith are unaware of the reasons for some of the happenings of this time of year.

That's what I want to do in this book – explain the background to these symbols and traditions. I want to attempt to de-mystify them and help you to understand their history and meaning.

Before beginning, I should explain that you will find a certain amount of ambiguity and multiple (even contradictory) explanations for some of our common Christmas symbols and traditions – especially the older ones. As people, we seem to require specific answers to exploratory questions. For example, I know that I have occasionally gone to great lengths to find the specific location where a past event occurred. We know that it would be even possible to find the exact places where men have once stood on the moon. However, Christmas celebrations have taken place over many

centuries and these celebrations have been modified over time. Not only has time made a difference, but Christmas is celebrated differently in different societies and cultures.

This means that there are often multiple answers to questions about the meaning of common Christmas symbols and traditions. However, it's still fun to think of the possibilities and interesting to consider the variations.

I hope that you'll enjoy finding out about them as you read about each one.

Good reading,

*Bruce Wilson*

# THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

## *The Bible Story of The Birth of Jesus*

If you are going to search anywhere for the story about the first Christmas, then the best place to start is by looking at the Bible. The story goes something like this.

A young woman named Mary, who was a virgin, lived in a place called Nazareth in northern Israel. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a Jewish carpenter. One day Mary was visited by an angel who explained to her that she would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit. She would give birth to this child and she would name him Jesus.

At first Mary was afraid and very troubled by the angel's words. Being a virgin, Mary questioned the angel, "How can this be?" The angel explained that the child would be God's own Son and that "nothing is impossible with God." Humbled and awestruck, Mary believed the angel of the Lord and rejoiced in God.

Mary miraculously became pregnant through the Holy Spirit, exactly as the angel had told her. When Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant, she knew that he could easily feel shamed. He would know that the child was not his own, and Mary's apparent infidelity carried a severe social stigma. Joseph not only had the right to divorce her, but under Jewish law Mary could also be put to death by stoning.

Although Joseph's initial reaction was to end their relationship, the appropriate thing for a virtuous man, such as he, was to treat Mary with great kindness. He did not want to cause her further shame, so he decided to act quietly. But God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to verify Mary's story and reassure him that his marriage to her was what God wanted. The angel explained that the child that Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that his name would be Jesus and that he was the Messiah. When Joseph woke from his dream, he willingly obeyed God and took Mary home to be his wife in spite of the public humiliation he would face.

At around that time, Caesar Augustus (The Roman Emperor) decreed that a census be taken, and that every person in the entire Roman Empire had to return to their own town to register. Joseph, being a descendant of David (the second king of the United Kingdom of Israel), was required to go to Bethlehem with Mary to register.

Shortly after arriving in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Because the town was busy due to the census, there was no accommodation available, so Joseph and Mary took shelter in an out building behind an inn. It was here that Jesus was born. Mary wrapped her baby in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger, or a feeding trough for the animals.

Out in the fields, an angel appeared to a group of shepherds who were caring for their sheep during the night. The angel announced that the Saviour had been born in Bethlehem, the town of David. Suddenly a great host of heavenly beings appeared with the angels and began singing praises to God. As the angelic beings departed, the somewhat frightened shepherds decided to travel to Bethlehem and see the Christ-child.

There they found Mary, Joseph and the baby, in the stable. After their visit, they began to spread the word about this amazing child and everything the angel had said about him. They went on their way still praising and glorifying God. But Mary kept quiet, treasuring their words and pondering them in her heart.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Herod was the king of Judea. At this time wise men (Magi) from the east saw a star and followed it, knowing that the star signified the birth of the Jesus, the king of the Jews. The wise men came to the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem and asked where the Christ was born. The rulers explained, "In Bethlehem in Judea," King Herod secretly met with the Magi and asked them to report back after they had found the child. Herod told the Magi that he too wanted to go and worship the babe, but his real purpose was to kill the child in order to protect his own position.

So the wise men continued to follow the star in search of the new born king and found Jesus with his mother in Bethlehem. They bowed and worshipped him, offering treasures of gold, incense and myrrh. When they left, they did not return to Herod. They had been warned in a dream of his plot to destroy the child.



## WHEN DID THE FIRST CHRISTMAS OCCUR?

No one really knows the exact date of the birth of Jesus. Julian and Gregorian calendars are based on a numbering system which begins with the supposed year in which Jesus was born. Therefore we label each year with a number such as 2009 AD (an abbreviation for the Latin Anno Domini – in the year of the Lord). But there is considerable dispute as to when his birth actually took place.

In biblical days, record keeping was not up to the standards we have today. There were no computerised filing systems or structured methods of cataloguing data. Only the wealthy, the judicial, or the religious classes of families had the ability to write. For everyday people, history was communicated verbally. Jesus was not exactly born in a social position for his birth to have any official notice taken or be recognised. He was just another child, so this information would not have been readily available or counted as important to one of the most famed historical record keepers of the time, Josephus.

The best way that we can try to determine an accurate date of Jesus' birth comes from the writings of the disciples of Jesus. However, as we read them, we need to understand that they were not actually present at the birth of Jesus and that their accounts are based on hearsay which we know evolves and changes with the passage of time. From a scientific view, the stories of the birth of Jesus are also without factual proof. There is no way of proving these events actually happened. However, we might try to learn something by comparing the writings of the disciples with the available historical records.

In Luke 1:5 we read that Jesus was born when Herod was King of Judea. Luke 2:2 also states that Jesus was born when Cyrenius was Governor of Syria. Historians tell us that Herod was king from 37 BC to 4 BC. Cyrenius did not become governor until 6 AD which was almost ten years after the death of Herod. These inconsistent pieces of information provide us with a best estimate that Jesus was actually born sometime between 37 BC and 6 AD.

From another viewpoint, Luke 2:1-4 records that around the time of Jesus' birth, Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, ordered everyone in all the Roman Empire to return to the city of their ancestors in order to be counted and taxed. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, reported that a census was conducted in Judea in 6 AD, but this was only a local census; not one to tax the whole Roman Empire. It only affected the people in the Jewish lands which were a new acquisition into the Roman Empire. The purpose of this census was to count only the male population so that they could be taxed at a later time.

Here is another inconsistency, for at the time of Jesus' birth, the Jews were still subject to King Herod. Caesar Augustus would only have had the power to tax people in areas under direct Roman rule. Nor is there any historical record of any mass migration of adults to their ancestral cities in order to be registered. This would arguably have been an impractical way to hold a census as the primitive transportation systems of the Roman Empire would have been totally inadequate to handle the flow of large numbers of people.

So if we want to use the date of the census and taxation to determine the date of the birth of Jesus, it leads us to 6AD, however historical records don't back up this up. So far, this really suggests that the biblical timing is a function of oral tradition. This line of argument still looks like the birth took place sometime between our original idea of between 37BC to 6AD.

This however, is still very questionable. In Matthew 2:16 we hear about King Herod's order to murder all boys under the age of two. We could assume that if such a terrible thing actually happened, that it would have been recorded by not only Josephus (who wrote in great detail about even minor actions and decisions of Herod), but probably the Romans would have recorded such a barbaric act so as to cast its newest conquest in a negative light. The date of that mass murder would give an approximate idea of Jesus' birth. According to historians these killings never happened. If the children were killed, then historians of the era would have been certain to have recorded the event. The mass murder was never mentioned. So this should probably be discounted as just another oral tradition as well.

It is however possible that the killing was on quite a small scale as Bethlehem was only a tiny village at the time. Some writers suggest that there would have only been as few as twenty to thirty boys in, and around, Bethlehem at this time. At the time, life was cheap and the killing of a small number of children may not have been particularly noted. Perhaps we just also have the evidence to make an informed judgement

Luke 2:8 describes shepherds as living in the fields and keeping watch over their flocks at night. If this were the case, we would have to take into account the seasonal weather of this region that would allow the shepherds to be in the fields at night. If it were December, it would be far too cold and wet for the shepherds to be in the field with their flocks and the herd would certainly have been moved into the safety and warmth of the pens, especially at night. According to the Talmud (a rabbinic record of discussions pertaining to Jewish law), the flocks were put out to grass

in March and brought in during the beginning of November. Luke is regarded as a careful historian. He doesn't actually say that the birth took place in winter, or December. We think that Jesus was probably born in late spring, summer, or early autumn. Scholars, using Biblical scriptures, propose that the birth was most likely during the months that we now call September or October. This is assuming John the Baptist was born in the spring and, as told in the Gospel of Luke, John's mother (Elizabeth) was already 6 months pregnant when Jesus was conceived. Assuming that Mary had a nine-month pregnancy, this would put Jesus' birth around September or October.

The timing of the arrival of the Star of Bethlehem confuses the issue even further. The biblical story tells us that the Magi approached Herod proclaiming to come from the East because they saw a star that they followed to Bethlehem. Considering what we now know about the rotation of the earth, there is very little probability that they would actually follow a star facing the east and end up in the west.

If we could positively identify the star, it would be easier to pinpoint a more accurate time and determine an exact month and year. If the star were a supernova, ancient sources record one occurring in 134 BC and another in 173 AD. If it were a comet, there were recordings of these events in 17 BC, 5 BC, 4 BC and 66 AD. In biblical days, comets were perceived as signs of doom, so the star is not likely to have been a comet. People have always to have been known to confuse planets as stars and in 7 BC there was a reported strange alignment and passing of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. So since there can be no real accounting for any specific type of star, the sighting of the star is often told to be just a miracle seen only by the Magi.

For purist Christians, the timing of Christmas is an issue of real curiosity. For them, they are celebrating (or in some cases not celebrating) a holiday that is being attributed to the day of the birth of Jesus, the leader of their religion.

Ordinary Christians don't seem to care to much about finding the exact date, they are just pleased that it happened at some time. Without the birth of Jesus, their religion would have never got off the ground.

For most other people, especially non-Christians who celebrate Christmas, it doesn't really matter at all on what date Jesus was born. After all, they are just celebrating the modern day festival season without any real connection to anything about religion or Jesus.

Christians may wonder why non-Christians would celebrate a holiday named after the Christ Mass. But if when we look into the history of the holiday in our next chapter, we will find that it was the Christians who hijacked a winter festive celebration rather than it being the other way around.

Whether we call it Christmas or not, the festive celebration is now pretty much as it has been for over a thousand years. It is hard to say which day is really the correct one.

## WHY DO WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS ON DECEMBER 25th

The origins of a Christmas festival dates back over 4,000 years. Ancient Midwinter festivities celebrated the return of the Sun from cold and darkness. Midwinter was a turning point between the Old Year and the New Year.

Many of today's Christmas traditions were celebrated centuries before the Christ Child was born. Some of the early traditions are rooted in the customs observed by early Mesopotamians. They worshipped many gods, the chief of whom was Marduk. Each year as winter arrived, it was believed that Marduk would battle the Monsters of Chaos. In order to assist Marduk during his struggle, the Mesopotamians held a festival for the New Year. They called this celebration Zagmuk and the festivities lasted for twelve days.

The King of Mesopotamia would return to the Temple of Marduk and swear his faithfulness to the god. The tradition called for the King to die at the end of the year and then return with Marduk to battle at his side. To spare their King, the Mesopotamians utilised a "mock" king. A criminal was chosen and dressed in royal clothes. He was given all due respect and the privileges of a true king but, at the end of the celebrations, the "mock" king was stripped of the royal garments and then put to death, thus sparing the life of the real monarch.

The ancient Persians and Babylonians celebrated a similar festival that they called the Sacaea. Part of that celebration included the exchanging of places within the community. Slaves would become masters and the original masters were obliged to obey the former slaves' commands.

In Scandinavia during the winter months, the Sun would disappear for months at a time. After thirty-five of these dark days, scouts would be sent to the mountaintops to await the return of this life-giving heavenly body. When the first light was espied, the scouts would hurry back to their villages bearing the good news. In celebration, a great festival would be held, called the Yuletide. Huge bonfires would also be lit to celebrate the welcome return of the Sun.

The ancient Greeks held ceremonies similar to those of the Zagmuk and Sacaea festivals. The purpose of this feast was to assist their god Kronos, who would battle against the god Zeus and his army of Titans.

Members of pagan orders (anyone holding a religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions) have always celebrated the Winter Solstice - the season of the year when days are shortest and nights longest. It was generally believed to be a time of drunkenness, revelry and debauchery. The pagan Romans called this celebration Saturnalia, in honour of their god Saturn. The festivities began in the middle of December and continued until January 1st. On December 25th, "The Birth of the Unconquerable Sun" was celebrated, as the days gradually lengthened and the Sun began to regain its dominance. It is a general pagan belief that the Sun dies during the Winter Solstice and then rises from the dead. With cries of "Jo Saturnalia!", the Roman celebration would include masquerades in the streets, magnificent festive banquets, the visiting of friends and the exchange of good-luck gifts known as Strenae, or "lucky fruits." Roman halls would be decked with garlands of laurel and green trees, adorned with lighted candles. Again, as with Sacaea, the masters and slaves would exchange places.

Saturnalia was considered a fun and festive time for the Romans, but early Christians believed it an abomination to honour such a pagan god. The early converts wanted to maintain the birthday of their Christ Child as a solemn and religious holiday - not one of cheer and merriment, as was the pagan celebration of Saturnalia.

As Christianity spread, however, the Church became alarmed by the continuing practice among its flock to continue to indulge in pagan customs and celebrate the festival of Saturnalia. At first, the holy men prohibited this type of revelry, but it was to no avail. Eventually, a decision was made to tame such celebrations and make them into a festive occasion better suited to honour the Christian Son of God.

According to some legends, the Christian celebration of Christmas was invented to compete against the pagan festivals held in December. The 25th was sacred not only to the Romans, but also to the Persians whose religion of Mithraism was one of Christianity's main rivals at that period in time. The Church was, however, finally successful in removing the merriment, lights and gifts from the Saturnalia festival and transferring them to the celebration of a Christian Christmas.

During the very early Christian centuries, the birth of the Christ Child was not celebrated in any form. However, we think that that Christmas has been commemorated since around 98 AD. In 137 AD., the then Pope ordered that the birthday of Jesus Christ be observed as a solemn feast and in the year 350 A.D., Pope Julius I selected December 25th as the date for the observance of Christmas. This date was made official in 375 A.D., when it was formally announced that the birth of Jesus would be honoured on this day. This announcement also allowed some of the older festivities (such as feasting, dancing and the exchange of gifts) to be incorporated into the observance of Christmas. It seems

that Julius was trying to make it as painless as possible for pagan Romans (who remained a majority at that time) to convert to Christianity. The new religion went down a bit easier, when people realised that their feasts would not be taken away from them.

We have stuck to the date of December 25th ever since.

# CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE AGES

As we have seen Christianity didn't play a part in festive celebrations until a long time after traditional winter holiday celebrations were already well established across many regions of the world. The newly found Christian religion was persecuted by both the Romans as a threat to their multi-god worship systems and also by the Jews as a threat to those who still did not believe they had a saviour. The Jews were actually waiting for a saviour of a more political kind to defend them against the Romans. When Jesus failed to do such a thing, he was discounted as being something between an oddball and a lesser prophet.

Christmas hasn't always been celebrated in the same way as it is today. Its form of celebration has changed over time, broadly in line with major changes in religious outlook.

## Early Centuries

The first Christians were Jewish converts such as the Nazarenes and Ebionites. These early Christians and Jews did not celebrate birthdays - they considered this to be a pagan practice. That's perhaps why there are no birthday celebrations mentioned in the Bible. Pagan celebrations were related to sun cycles (Sun Days) and it is for this reason that some Biblical fundamentalists do not celebrate birthdays, including Christmas. The Jehovah's Witnesses are an example of one of these fundamentalist groups.

The Christians of early times had to be secretive about their beliefs as they could lead to a death sentence. At this time they were the oppressed minority. Christianity was banned by the Roman Empire for the first 280 years of its existence. However in 315, Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared it to be the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Christianity and a number of pagan beliefs began to merge. The cult of Isis, an Egyptian mother religion was absorbed into the church with Mary (mother of Jesus) replacing Isis. Mithraism, popular with Roman soldiers, featured a sacrificial meal which involved eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a bull. The Lord's Supper as celebrated in Christian communion became an easy substitute for this. In this way, the early Catholic Church was born, it was supported by the power and influence of the Roman emperors. When then Roman Empire collapsed, the popes took on the title that had previously belonged to the emperors – Pontifex Maximus

In 350 AD, Pope Julius 1st declared that Christ's birth would be celebrated on December 25. As we have already seen, this coincided with the date on which the feast of the Son of Isis was held.

By the year 476, the Catholic Church had a great degree of influence. The fall of the Western part of the Roman Empire in that year gave rise to an unofficial system of government by the Catholic Church. This eventually became formal and structured to the point where the church held as much political power as it held religious influence. By this time, Christmas was being celebrated as a Holy Day..

## Middle Ages

Medieval Christmas celebrations were generally not over in a day, but continued until the 6th of January (the Egyptian solstice). This was the feast of the Epiphany on the 12th day after Christmas. Epiphany celebrated the visit to Jesus by the wise men (Magi). In this way, Christmas was actually overshadowed by Epiphany and this gave rise to the traditions of the Twelve Days of Christmas (December 25 – January 5); a time that appears in the liturgical calendars as Christmas-tide or Twelve Holy Days. We sing about this now in the popular Christmas song "The Twelve Days of Christmas".

Some cultures carried the celebrations through until forty days after Christmas to the date of an ancient pagan festival on 2nd February.

By the first Millennium (1000AD), the prominence of Christmas Day had begun to increase. A number of kings - Charlemagne (the founding father of French & German monarchies), King Edmund the Martyr and King William I of England were all crowned on a Christmas Day..

By the High Middle Ages, the holiday had become so prominent that writers routinely noted where various royalty celebrated Christmas. King Richard II of England, reportedly hosted a Christmas feast in 1377 at which twenty-eight oxen and three hundred sheep were eaten. Carolling had also become popular although various writers of the time condemned it as being lewd, associating it with the unruly traditions of Saturnalia. Drunkenness (with a special Christmas ale), promiscuity and gambling were also common aspects of the Medieval Christmas

While Christmas during the Middle Ages was a public festival, gift-giving was usually reserved to occur only between people with legal relationships, such as tenant and landlord.

## Reformation

In the early 1500's a Christian reform movement we know as the Reformation began sweeping across Europe. This gave rise to Protestantism. Scholars at this time believed the Catholic Church to be corrupt and not what Jesus had in mind. They wanted to kick out most of the symbolism within the Church that had any roots in pagan origins. This movement created the Lutheran church and denominations such as the Calvinists and Presbyterians. In England it eventually gave rise to Anglicanism and much later to the Methodist and Baptist movements.

The puritans in these movements condemned Christmas celebration as having "trappings of popery". Holidays such as Easter, Christmas, Halloween and others came under attack for being the root of all evil within the Church and in order to go back to the purity of Christianity, it was necessary to eliminate them or minimise them.

Some of the more liberal purists wanted only to eliminate the pagan symbolism and make the Christian religion solely about the observance of Christ. Other extreme purists wanted to completely distance themselves from the holiday altogether, without proposing any form of replacement for the holy days. Following the Parliamentary victory over King Charles I during the English Civil War, England's Puritan rulers banned Christmas, in 1647. Needless to say, this was not exactly a popular concept amongst the people. Pro-Christmas rioting broke out in several cities, and for weeks Canterbury was controlled by the rioters, who decorated doorways with holly and shouted royalist slogans.

The Roman Catholic Church responded by promoting Christmas in a more religiously oriented form. The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 ended the ban, but many clergymen still disapproved of Christmas celebration.

Most historians agree that Christmas (Christ-Mass) as we know it today, began in Germany, though Catholics and Lutherans still disagree about which church celebrated it first. The earliest record of a tree being decorated in a Christian celebration was in 1521 in the Alsace region of Germany. This led a prominent Lutheran minister of the day to cry blasphemy: "It would be better that they should look to the true tree of life, Christ", he said.

Christmas continued in a low key way, but by the 1820s, some British writers began to worry that Christmas was dying out. These writers looked back on the medieval celebrations and considered them to be a time of heartfelt celebration. They began efforts to revive the holiday. Charles Dickens's book 'A Christmas Carol', published in 1843, played a major role in reinventing Christmas as a holiday emphasising family, goodwill, and compassion as opposed to communal celebration and hedonistic excess.

In America, interest in Christmas was revived in the 1820s by several short stories by Washington Irving which appear in his *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* and "Old Christmas", and by Clement Clarke Moore's 1822 poem *A Visit From St. Nicholas* (popularly known by its first line: 'Twas the Night Before Christmas). Irving's stories depicted harmonious warm-hearted holiday traditions he claimed to have observed in England.

In Australia, the first Christmas was celebrated in 1788 at Sydney Cove by Reverend Johnson. While people in the first fleet would have certainly come from many faiths, this Christmas would have been celebrated in a stern Anglican tradition. Ministers from other faiths did not arrive in Australia until the 1820's. Records show that after the service, Governor Phillips and his officers dined heartily, toasting King George III and his family. For the majority of the first white inhabitants, the convicts, there was no change to their regular ration of bread and water, Just a reprieve for one lucky convict who had his sentence of 200 lashes reduced to just 150.

The first record of a Christmas Day picnic in Australia is in 1806, when Captain John Macarthur and his wife invited friends to dine with them at the 'charmingly rural spot' of Cockle Bay in Darling Harbour. Parrot Pie is first recorded as hitting the Christmas table in Adelaide in 1836 and it was accompanied by plum pudding in the 38c degree temperature of the day. Going to the beach, now a major Australian Christmas tradition, was first noted by a Melbourne newspaper in the 1840's.

## Modern Day Christmas

With our increased levels of migration, Christmas in Australia is now a multicultural festival. Our symbols and traditions are a fusion of various cultures and their religious festivals. Our customs in Australia come from many places, but mainly from those located in the Northern Hemisphere. Santa Claus has a Dutch origin. He was developed from St. Nicholas who was a real person who originally came from Turkey. He brought gifts to the children. The idea that Santa Claus comes down the chimney originated in Norway, where children hang Christmas stockings on the fireplace mantel.

With increased levels of affluence and consumerism, Christmas has now become largely a secular holiday and a commercial enterprise with many mass-produced goods such as decorations, cards, food and toys all marketed for Christmas more heavily than for any other festival in the year. The retail industry seems to press Christmas upon us well before we seem to be ready for it. It is a frequently complaint that stores start Christmas "too early" and too aggressively. This may not only apply to Christmas, but to other seasonal celebrations as well. As one wag put it "You can tell when it's Christmas because that's when the Easter Eggs begin to appear on the Supermarket shelves".

The most sceptical view of modern Christmas is that the all fads, decorations, festive goods and paraphernalia are just a commercial scam to make us spend money on over-priced useless goods. However true this is, Christmas is now a significant secular social event as much as it is a religious festival. Families come together at Christmas even if they do not do so for the rest of the year. Even in non western countries, people decorate their houses and shop windows abound with brightly lit Christmas displays. In some countries, Christmas and New Year's celebrations have become institutionally intertwined. This helps to make Christmas a meaningful family celebration, even if on top of that there is a thick cover of shallow commercialism.

Christians have become concerned that festivities now contain little focus on Jesus, the Christ Child. Others in the community are happy to celebrate the family and social events of the Christmas season.

However, to try and completely remove the commercial aspects of Christmas would potentially destroy it as a family occasion. It would probably slip back into an obscure religious day for the pious and people would probably look for another occasion to celebrate with their families. We would then have a season in which people would never have as much fun.

# CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS

## Angels

The word angel in English is a combination of the Old English word engel (with a hard g) and the Old French word angele. Both derive from the Latin angelus, and thence the Greek word angellos ('messenger'). Angels are usually viewed as messengers of a supreme divine being, and sent to do the tasks of that being.

Early Christians took over Jewish ideas of angels and the Christian concept of an angel shifted between the angel as a messenger of God and a manifestation of God himself. Later came identification of individual angelic messengers: Gabriel, Michael, (Raphael, and Uriel). Then, in the space of little more than two centuries (from the third to the fifth) the image of angels took on definite characteristics both in theology and in art.

By the late fourth century, the Church Fathers decided that there were different categories of angels, with appropriate missions and activities assigned to them.

The bible references angels frequently regarding the birth of Jesus. The Angel Gabriel informed Mary that she was to bear a child. Angels are depicted in Renaissance Art and divine messengers of God and are frequently seen all over the nativity surrounding Christ. So, the association of Christmas with angels is not new.

Over the centuries, artists have represented angels in different ways. Early angels were mostly portrayed with an image based on the Greek goddess of victory, Nike. Halos above their heads were shaped like discs (rather than rings) to represent purity, holiness and spiritual power. Angels were also featured with harps, which was believed to be their chief occupation, praising God with music and song. Today, angels are represented as being more human-like, with wings and ring-like halos.

I've never seen an angel, other than my granddaughters, so I have no idea what they really look like. I'm just happy to rely on the images created by artists who have more imagination and creativity than I will ever have. I am quite happy with their portrayals of angels as lovely and beautiful beings.

The most common adornment on top of the Christmas Tree is either a Star or an Angel, both of which are used to symbolise the divine guidance and that Mary and Joseph had during Christ's birth and to help symbolize that in each of our homes today.

## Bells

Bells have traditionally been used to announce the coming or arrival of an event, activity, or occasion. They toll for good times. They toll for bad times. They ring out warnings. Bells herald in the New Year. Bells are rung to announce the marriage of a man and a woman. Bells are rung at churches to call people to gather, as warnings, and to bring people together to make announcements. They are rung during Christmas to announce the arrival of the season, to proclaim the birth of Christ.

Ringling of bells can be traced back to pagan winter celebrations. During those superstitious times, noisemakers were used to scare away evil spirits in the night. Among those early noisemakers were bells. People had fun ringing the bells and making noise. It was too much fun to just use bells to scare demons away. So over time, bell ringing was incorporated into other events and activities.

In the Middle Ages, bells were the only form of sound available to gather large crowds together in the village or to come to church. Sometimes during church ceremonies (even today in some more traditional churches); a bell would have been rung to signify a particular point in a service (i.e. prayer or critical event.) to get the attention of the congregation or those who were outside the church and could not see what was going on. In this way, they knew how to participate. The use of large church bells to call the faithful to worship may have been started by Bishop Paulinus of Nola (431 A.D.) of Campania in southern Italy.

Some churches were identifiable by the sound of their bell and also by how many bells they had. The more bells that were rung, the more important was the occasion. For example in some churches, Easter was a 3-bell event, and Christmas was a 4-bell event. Today many churches no longer have a tower nor a bell, so the tradition of getting people's attention by ringing a bell is dying out. We now have many more modern ways of getting people's attention. Who needs a bell when we have mobile phones, pagers, modern PA systems and large screen videos.

Bells are still also used to scare animals and provide cheer to those outdoors. In both Japan and North America, it is common to find hikers wearing small bells on their backpacks so that the sound scares away dangerous animals such



as bears and wild boar. It is a very cheery sound to be walking behind someone with their little bell tinkling with each step! Horses, chariots, and sleighs have all been outfitted with tiny bells to create a merry sound.

Somewhere over time, a connection was made between bells and their ability to call people to attention with the Christian Christmas season. Their soft, cheerful tones blended well and readily enhanced the sounds of the season. Bells became a symbol for the announcement of Christ's birth. They obviously weren't rung at Bethlehem for the first Christmas because, as we have seen earlier, Jesus was not born to nobility and his birth would have gone largely unnoticed. However, today, they play a traditional role and we see their image on cards, trees and many forms of festive decoration.

In Australia, we have a number of native plants that are in flower at Christmas and a number are in the shape of a bell. They are in bloom at Christmas because then it is our summer season. These plants quickly became a substitute for unavailable traditional European plants by the early settlers and many people still cultivate them today.

The most obvious are the Christmas Bells which flourish in New South Wales. The botanical names for these are *Blandfordia grandiflora*, which are yellow in colour. Another variety, *Blandfordia nobilis* are slightly smaller. These flowers are red with yellow tips and more cylindrical rather than funnel-shaped.

The New South Wales Christmas Bush *Ceratopetalum gummiferum* is an erect shrub up to 5 m high by 1.5 m diameter. It has light green, trifoliolate leaves with toothed leaflets. Sprays of white star-like flowers occur in late spring followed by beautiful reddened, swollen calyces in summer.

Another Christmas Bush, *Prostanthera lasianthos*, can be found along the eastern coast from Queensland to Tasmania. It is a shrub or small tree with white, pink, or mauve flowers that occur in summer. It grows from 2 m to 10 m high.

A different Christmas Bush, *Bursaria spinosa*, grows in South Australia and Tasmania. It is an erect, thorny shrub to 3 m and often taller. Masses of white flowers cover the bush in late spring and summer, followed by attractive brown fruits.

We also have a Christmas Orchid, *Calanthe triplicate*, which grows in Queensland and New South Wales.

## Camels

A typical Christmas card scene shows the three wise men riding camels across a landscape and following a star.

Sorry to disappoint you, but there is no mention of camels whatsoever in the bible story of the first Christmas. The inclusion of camels is another piece of mythology that has been added and built up over time. There is even conjecture as to whether the Magi even rode them.

Perhaps, it's understandable to assume the use of camels by the Magi. Transport in biblical days was limited to walking and / or the use of beasts of burden such as donkeys and camels. In Roman days, the most popular form of carrying goods was by a wheeled cart which was pulled by a team of up to eight yoked oxen. Camels would have had an advantage in long distance travel, and the wise men or Magi were recorded as coming from afar. Camels also had the advantage of being able to carry a load five times heavier than a donkey and were able to travel as far as 40 kilometres in a day.

Anyway, to fill you in on a little camel information; camels are even-toed ungulates within the genus *Camelus*. The dromedary, one-humped or Arabian camel has a single hump while the Bactrian Asian camel has two humps. They are native to the dry desert areas of western Asia, and central and east Asia, respectively. The term camel is also used more broadly to describe any of the six camel like creatures in the family Camelidae: the two true camels, and the four South American camelids, the llama, alpaca, guanaco, and vicuña. I wonder how many people wearing a lovely article of clothing made from alpaca wool really know that it comes from a form of camel?

The average life expectancy of a camel is 40 to 50 years. A fully grown adult camel stands 1.85 m (6 ft 1 in) at the shoulder and 2.15 m (7 ft 1 in) at the hump. The hump rises about 30 inches (75 cm) out of its body. Camels can run up to 65 km/h (40 mph) in short bursts and sustain speeds of up to 40 km/h (25 mph).

Camels do not store water in their humps as is commonly believed; the humps are actually a reservoir of fatty tissue. Concentrating body fat in their humps minimizes heat-trapping insulation throughout the rest of their body, which may be an adaptation to living in hot climates. Their ability to withstand long periods without water is really due to a series of physiological adaptations. For example, their red blood cells have an oval shape, unlike those of other mammals, which are circular. These help blood flow, even when the camel is dehydrated. An adult camel is able to drink between 100 litres to 150 litres at one time. A feature of their nostrils is that a large amount of water vapour in

their exhalations is trapped and returned to their body fluids, thereby reducing the amount of water lost through respiration

We now have more wild camels in Australia than any other country in the world. They were first bought into Australia in the 19th Century by Afghan workers as a means of transport in our arid outback. A number ultimately escaped into the bush and these have bred prolifically. We now export live camels to Saudi Arabia. That's a bit like taking coal to Newcastle, isn't it?

## Candles

As we know, a candle is a source of light, and is sometimes used as a source of heat. It is made from a solid block of fuel (commonly wax) with an embedded wick.

Before the advent of electricity, candles and oil lamps were the main source of illumination. Until the 20th century, candles were more common in northern Europe whilst in southern Europe and the Mediterranean, oil lamps were more widely used. It's from northern Europe that many of our Christmas traditions originate.

In Rome, at the time of the first century, candles were made of tallow (animal fat) and the pith of rushes. The Latin word "candere" means to flicker. The Egyptians and Cretans were making their candles from beeswax as early as 3000 BC. In the 18th century, oil from the sperm whale, was used to produce a superior candle. Then, late in the 18th century, other vegetable oils came into use as much cheaper substitutes. Paraffin was first distilled in 1830, and revolutionised candle-making, as it was an inexpensive material which produced a high-quality, odourless candle that burned reasonably cleanly.

Today, candles are used mainly for their aesthetic value and scent, particularly to set a soft, warm, or romantic ambiance, and for emergency lighting during electrical power failures. If you have had any interest in aromatherapy, you will know the value of burning candles with various scents.

Lighting candles is a custom of many religions for many different reasons.

Christians regard the light of a candle as being symbolic of the "Light of Christ" which took them out of the darkness of superstition and sin. During the Middle Ages it was customary to light one large candle on Christmas Eve in both your church and home to represent the Star of Bethlehem. In Scandinavian countries, keeping the Yule Candle burning was very important. Sometimes there were two candles: one for the wife and one for the husband. Whichever went out first, meant that the other partner would live longer. The moral of this story is to never place your candle in a draught!

In Scotland, it was believed that if the Christmas candle went out before midnight, it meant a great disaster would happen to the family. In Ireland, they made their candles so big that the candleholders had to be carved out of large turnips. (This is also the origin of the Jack-O-Lantern, which is used in America for Halloween)

French and German legend states that one Christmas Eve, Bonchevalier, a fifteenth century knight, found a pine tree which was lit up with candles and had a star resting on its top. Some of the candles stood upright while others hung upside down. When he got home, his mother explained to Bonchevalier that he had seen the "Tree of Humanity." The upright candles represented good people, while the inverted candles stood for evil people. The star at the top was the Christ Child watching over the entire world.

Some people who hold a contemporary 'New Age' perspective have proposed that candles are a symbol of an individual's life force, or the light he or she offers to the world. They represent spirituality, devotion, faith, longing, and the life devoted to a single, generally spiritual passion or aspiration. They symbolise the passing years of a human life as it slowly burns or melts away. This is far too deep for me to see, so I'll just stick with the more realistic versions..

Ordinary people just see candles as giving off a light that is warm and comforting, even romantic.

## Candy Cane

The Candy Cane is a North American addition to our set of Christmas symbols. In Australia, we see them on Christmas cards and stationery, as well as ornaments for the Christmas tree.

The development of the candy cane took a few hundred years. Before the invention of the modern pacifier, parents used to give their babies unflavoured white sugar sticks to suck on. During the 1670's a German choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral had the sugar sticks bent into a shepherd's staff and passed out to children attending the Christmas services. This holiday custom spread throughout Europe and fancy canes, decorated with roses, were used as Christmas decorations in many homes.

The candy canes became popular in America by the 1800's and were used to decorate Christmas trees and were depicted on Christmas Cards. They were still white in colour. Around 1900, the white candy cane received its traditional red stripes and peppermint flavouring. The legend that describes this evolution goes as follows:

A candy maker in Indiana (probably Bob McCormick) wanted to express the meaning of Christmas through a symbol made of candy. He came up with the idea of bending the original straight candy sticks into the shape of a Candy Cane. He incorporated several symbols of Christ's love and sacrifice through the Candy Cane. First, he used a plain white peppermint stick. The colour white symbolizes the purity and sinless nature of Jesus. Next, he added three small stripes to symbolize the pain inflicted upon Jesus before His death on the cross. There are three of them to represent the Holy Trinity. He added a bold stripe to represent the blood Jesus shed for mankind. When looked at with the crook on top, it looks like a shepherd's staff because Jesus is the shepherd of man. If you turn it upside down, it becomes the letter J symbolizing the first letter in Jesus' name. The candy maker made these candy canes for Christmas, so everyone would remember what Christmas is all about. The peppermint flavour of modern candy canes is said to be similar to hyssop. In Old Testament times, hyssop was associated with purification and sacrifice.

There is strong doubt as to whether this story is anything more than a myth and a created legend. You can make up your own mind as to whether you would like to believe it or not. It does make an interesting story, although anyone can concoct a reason for certain colours and flavours.

## Christmas Star

The early Babylonians, Egyptians, Chinese and Jews all had stars that were important to their religions. But the Star at the top of our trees for Christmas typically represents the Star of Bethlehem.

We read in the bible that a star guided the wise men on their way to visit Jesus. I actually provided some details of the star in my attempt to explain the timing of the first Christmas in one of the early chapters in this book. There have been many attempted explanations of this phenomenon – an alignment of the planets, perhaps it was a supernova, or maybe even a comet.

Regardless of your faith, the story of the 'Star of Bethlehem' is one of the most vivid symbols of Christmas. Over the centuries, scholars have debated about the nature of this biblical light that heralded this event. Two thousand years ago, astronomy and astrology were considered one and the same. The motions of the heavenly bodies were used to determine the events of history, and the fate of people's lives. Of the various groups of priests and prophets of this period, those which commanded the most respect were the Magi - whose origins are not entirely clear. They were known as 'wise men'. We can only assume they were actually priests who relied on their knowledge of astronomy/astrology.

Whatever the Star of Bethlehem was, it seems to have had more impact on us than any other star before or since. It is also possible that the mystery of the Star will never be completely solved. For many of us though, it is the mystery itself that drives us to find the solution.

When you next set up your Christmas tree and place a star on the top, remember that it is a symbol of God's guiding light.

## Christmas Tree

There are a number of ancient stories about the use of trees in various festivities that may explain the origin of the Christmas Tree.

The Egyptians held midwinter festivals in honour of their god Horus, son of Isis (Goddess of Motherhood and Fertility). Their symbol for this was a palm tree with twelve shoots (one for each month of the year).

During the Roman festival of Saturnalia people decorated trees with candles and also brought laurel boughs into their house on January 1.

The evergreen tree was decorated by the pagans at the feast of the winter solstice. The evergreen tree was a sign that winter would end. Many of the northern hemisphere trees were deciduous, and the evergreen tree (fir, pine, spruce etc) was used to symbolise continuing life.

The Christmas tree as we know it began to be seen in the 16th century, and was not popular outside of Germany until the 19th century. The original Germany tree originally wasn't a real tree, but a wooden-shaped pyramid structure covered with evergreen boughs. The Weihnachtspyramid is assumed to have originated from the "Paradise Tree" (the fir tree decorated with apples) used in Medieval mystery plays.

By the early 1600's many German towns were celebrating Christmas with elaborately decorated trees. Christmas markets were set up to provide everything from gifts, food and more practical things such as a knife grinder to sharpen the knife to carve the Christmas Goose. Gingerbreads and wax ornaments bought as souvenirs were taken home to hang on Christmas Trees. A visitor to Strasbourg in 1601 records a tree decorated with "wafers and golden sugar-twists (Barley sugar) and paper flowers of all colours". So popular had this custom become that by the end of the sixteenth century many communities in Alsace tried to limit or prohibit the use of evergreens for the holidays, in part, to protect the forests from the over-cutting of young trees.

Christmas trees continued to grow in popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly among Lutherans who took the custom to America in their great period of immigration. The idea of the Christmas tree soon spread to other countries. They became fashionable in England during the mid 1800's. In 1846, the popular Royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were illustrated in the London News with their children around a Christmas Tree.

Now we have Christmas trees in many forms. The stores sell artificial ones which have none of that nice pine smell, but nor do they drop litter on the floor. Many people are on the lookout for people selling live trees by the roadside and these add a great tradition to any home. Others have a little tree in a pot that they bring indoors for the Christmas season. There is no little pagan significance, and absolutely no biblical basis for a Christmas tree. However, the idea of a tree has evolved as a strong symbol of Christmas.

## Christmas Tree Ornaments

A Christmas tree without ornaments looks bare and uninteresting. Everyone decorates their tree with some form of adornment – a star at the top, balls, animals, birds and whatever takes their imaginative fancy. The original decorations were apples (remember how apples on the evergreen tree gave rise to the Christmas colours).

Over the years, various things were added in addition to the apples. Gilded nuts and gingerbread cookies were hidden in the tree. Marzipan candies, shaped like fruits and vegetables, were hung from the boughs. Brightly decorated eggshells, cut in half and filled with tiny candies, were set in the tree like bird nests. Sweets were hung from the tree and on the Twelfth Night of Christmas, January 5th, when it was believed that the Magi arrived in Bethlehem bearing gifts, the tree was shaken and the children finally were allowed to eat the sweets that fell to the floor..

The type of Christmas tree decorations we use today started when families in colder climates combined the decorations of the Paradise Tree with the candles that were used on conifer trees. Wafers which once hung on the Paradise tree were replaced with cookies in the form of hearts, bells, angels and stars.

In 1880, Woolworth's department store was first to put manufactured Christmas tree ornaments on sale. They were immediately popular. Nowadays we can use whatever we like as decorations. Some people use the shiny ones from the department stores and others use ones that they have made with loving care by themselves. In our home, we have one little tree on which we hang a little souvenir from each of the countries that we have visited overseas.

Eventually some form of lighting became added to the Christmas tree. Martin Luther, in the 16th century, is credited as being the first person to use candles. We can thank Albert Sadacca, a New Yorker, for creating the first electrical Christmas tree lighting. When he was fifteen, in 1917, a tragic fire in New York City was started by candles on a Christmas tree. This inspired him to invent electric Christmas lights. The Sadacca family sold ornamental novelty items including novelty lights in their store. so Albert adapted some of these products into safe electric lights for Christmas trees. The first year only one hundred strings of white lights sold. The second year Sadacca used brightly coloured bulbs and a booming multi-million-dollar business was born. In 1923 President Calvin Coolidge held the first lighting of an outdoor Christmas tree at the White House, thereby starting a long tradition

Setting up the Christmas tree is an important part of family Christmas preparations. We need it looking just right so that we feel good about the festive season and so that we have a nice tree under which to put our presents for giving out on Christmas Day.

## Frankincense

Frankincense was one of the gifts of the Magi. Tradition says that it was presented to the Christ Child by Balthasar, the black king from Ethiopia or Saba.

Frankincense is a sweet smelling gum resin derived from certain Boswellia trees which, at the time of Christ, grew in Arabia, India, and Ethiopia. The frankincense trade was at its height during the days of the Roman Empire. At that time this resin was considered as valuable as gems or precious metals. It was, and still is, used as form of incense.

The use of incense goes far back in time. The reference books tell us that incense was in common use in Near East countries, burnt for its perfume. It may have been used to mask smells and odours. From a secular use it passed into religious service.

Frankincense was associated with prayers and burned on pagan altars in Rome, Persia, Babylon, and Assyria. It was also used in purification ceremonies. Nero burned it by the ton. In ancient Babylon one thousand talents of frankincense was burnt on the altar of Bel during his annual feast. Romans burnt this resin in their homes and on state occasions. (One Roman talent = 32.3 kilograms). Large quantities were burnt along the routes of the Roman triumphs or victory parades.

The ancients mixed frankincense with wine and myrrh to create a "strong drink" which eased the pains of the dying and the condemned. In China frankincense was thought to be a treatment for leprosy. Egyptians used it to make cosmetics, embalm dead bodies, and provide an aromatic warmth on the braziers of their homes in chilly weather.

Frankincense was an ingredient in the sacred incense and holy anointing oil of the Israelites. It was burnt with almost every sacrifice offered in Jerusalem's temple. Salt was added to the mixture to produce a fine white smoke. The sweet smell of incense and its rising smoke gave it a kind of natural symbolism. It became the image of something pleasing to God. The rising smoke came to symbolise a person's, or people's, prayers rising up to God. Early Christians continued to find symbolic meaning in the use of incense in their church services.

So, among Christians today, incense has ritual and symbolic meaning. Its sweet aroma symbolizes something pleasing and acceptable being offered to God.

## Gifts

The first Christmas gifts were those given by the Wise Men to Baby Jesus.

This custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas originates from the Roman festival of Saturnalia where it was customary to exchange presents. It was usually the masters of the slaves and the wealthy who gave to the slaves and the poor in a reversal of roles. Gifts were also exchanged among family and friends.

The Christians could not stop this customary practice, so they adopted it along with the other observances of the seasons. The giving of gifts was then said to be symbolic of the Magi who gave gifts to Jesus. This custom was also observed in one way or another throughout Europe, the Middle East and Africa where to give a gift is an expression of gratitude and love.

The giver of Christmas gifts varies across different countries. It could be the Christ Child, Kriss Kringle, Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Befana in (Italy), Babushka (Russia), the Magi or St. Nicholas. "Nisse" are Scandinavian elves who hide presents for children. Jultomten, a gnome brings gifts to children in Sweden.

People didn't really exchange elaborate gifts until late in the 1800s. This practice has come about through a combination of the Santa Claus story of giving gifts to good children and an amazing retailing phenomenon that has grown since the turn of the century. These have combined to make gift giving a central focus of the Christmas tradition.

## Gold

Gold was bought as a gift to the Christ Child by Melchior, the Astrologer from Arabia

Ancient Persians exported gold to kings and emperors in Asia and the Middle East. It has always been a valuable metal and in biblical days, gold coins were very much prevalent. Up until 1971, the gold standard was the basis of the world's currency with each country's currency being based on the value of gold.

Gold is a chemical element with the symbol Au. It is a highly sought-after precious metal in jewellery, in sculpture, and for ornamentation since the beginning of recorded history.

Gold occurs as nuggets or grains in rocks, in veins and in alluvial deposits. It is dense, soft, shiny and the most malleable pure metal known. A single gram can be beaten into a sheet of one square meter, or an ounce into 300 square feet.

Pure gold has a bright yellow colour and lustre traditionally considered attractive, which it maintains without rusting in air or water. It is the only metal that does not oxidise.

Gold is seen as a symbol of kingship on earth. It has been long valued due to its beauty and resistance to corrosion. It has been used in jewellery and commerce for thousands of years.

## Holly

When we think of holly for Christmas, we are once again back in the northern hemisphere.

Holly is a dense shrub with spiny leaves and red berries. The leaves remain green throughout the year and it bears its fruit of red berries in the winter time, which in the northern hemisphere is at Christmas time.

The holly tree was considered sacred by the ancient Druids of Britain and Gaul.

European pagans believed that bringing holly branches into the home would keep the elves of the woodlands safe during the long, cold winter.

The ancient Celts celebrated the battle of the Oak King and the Holly King. The Oak King represented one half of the year, and the Holly King represented the other. Based on the heartiness of the holly tree in the winter, the Holly King reigned triumphant during the cold months of the year.

The jagged edges of the holly leaves have been compared to the crown of thorns Christ was forced to wear during the crucifixion.

In Medieval Europe, holly was hung about the doors and windows to keep away witches, spells, evil spirits, goblins, and lightning. On Christmas eve, English virgins hung holly on their beds to protect their virtue from Christmas goblins. However, elves and fairies were welcome in British households, and sprigs of holly were hung as hiding places for them. Romans gave gifts of holly to their friends during Saturnalia as good luck charms and protection against evil. Because of all these superstitions, early Christians were forbidden to decorate with this plant, especially during Saturnalia.

Some stories say that people originally associated holly with Christmas because of its sharp prickly leaves which they thought resembled the crown of thorns that were placed on the head of Christ at his crucifixion. A more practical reason is perhaps that it was probably one of the only plants that had some available colour for use as a decoration in the bleak northern hemisphere winter of bare trees and snow covered ground.

Many superstitions surround the holly. It is regarded as a man's plant and is believed to bring good luck and protection to men whilst ivy brings the same to women. It is thought that whoever brings the first sprig of Christmas holly into the home will wear the pants that year.

An obscure Christian myth says that one winter night, the holly miraculously grew leaves out of season in order to hide the Holy Family from Herod's soldiers. Since then, it has been an evergreen as a token of Christ's gratitude. This supposes that Holly grew in the arid climate of the Middle East. To my knowledge, it is a plant of temperate climates and this legend would not have any basis in fact.

In Germany, holly is called Christdorn in memory of Christ's crown of thorns. According to legend, the holly's branches were woven into a painful crown and placed on Christ's head while the soldiers mocked him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews." The holly's berries used to be white but Christ's blood left them with a permanent crimson stain.

In Australia, our holly doesn't have any fruit at Christmas (summer) so we mainly use the leaves for decoration.

## Ivy

Ivy is another plant, along with holly and European mistletoe that has its flowers and fruit in winter. Perhaps it became a symbol of Christmas for this simple reason.

Like holly, many myths, legends and superstitions surround ivy.

The symbolism of ivy rests on three facts: it clings; it thrives in the shade; and it is an evergreen. Modern women won't like this story at all, but the old fashioned image of clinging ivy is that of the helpless female clinging to her man for protection. It also signifies true love, faithfulness, and undying affection - both in marriage and in friendship.

Like other evergreens, the ivy symbolizes eternal life. It has been associated with the Egyptian god, Osiris, and the Greco-Roman god, Attis; both of whom were supposedly resurrected from the dead. Medieval Christians, noticing that ivy thrived on dead trees used it to symbolize the immortal soul which lived even though the body (represented by the dead tree) had decayed.

In spite of its use as a symbol of immortality, ivy's association with death caused it to be strongly associated with mortality. According to Crippen, at Christmas time, ivy, should be used only on the outside of buildings because this holiday celebrates Jesus, the giver of everlasting life and destroyer of death.

Because it thrives in the shade, ivy represents debauchery, carousing, merrymaking, sensuality, the flourishing of hidden desires, and the enjoyment of secret or forbidden pleasures. Some even believed this plant to have demonic associations. Dionysus (a.k.a. Bacchus) the Greco-Roman god of wine, satyrs, and Sileni are often wreathed in ivy. Crowns of ivy were believed to prevent intoxication and thought to aid inspirational thinking. Therefore, the Greeks crowned their poets with wreaths of this plant. Although generally considered poisonous, the ivy's black berries were used to treat plague.

## Jesus

Jesus is clearly the central element of Christmas; it is the celebration of his birth.

I'm finding it quite hard to write this chapter. How does one do justice to a description of the person who Christians believe is the son of God, as well as being a part of God himself?

Our knowledge of Jesus as a person mainly comes from the four gospels in the bible. Each gospel portrays Jesus' life and its meaning a little differently. Mark presents Jesus as a heroic, charismatic man of action and great deeds. Matthew portrays him especially as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy, and Luke emphasises Jesus' miraculous powers and his support for the poor and for women. John describes Jesus' earthly life as a manifestation of the eternal Word. His writings are not a biography of Jesus but more a theological presentation of his divinity.

To combine these four stories into one story creates the problem of creating a fifth story, which would be different from any of the original ones.

The name "Jesus" is derived from the Hebrew-Aramaic word "Yeshua," meaning "Yahweh [the Lord] is salvation." The name "Christ" is actually a title for Jesus. It comes from the Greek word "Christos," meaning "the Anointed One," or "Messiah" in Hebrew.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, to a devout Jewish woman named Mary and a carpenter named Joseph. Joseph was not Jesus' father as he was conceived by a miracle of the Holy Spirit before the couple had had any sexual relationship. Those of the Roman Catholic Faith do not believe this, but the bible tells us that brothers and sisters were born into the family, but there was a difference; while they had the same mother (Mary) their father was Joseph and not the Holy Spirit.

After his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus and his parents returned to the little town of Nazareth where he grew up. We don't know much at all about his childhood. His home in Nazareth was a poor one in which everyone probably had to lend a hand in order to make ends meet. Archaeological evidence shows that in biblical days, Nazareth was a small agricultural village of between 200 and 400 people who lived in 35 homes spread over about four hectares. It would have been 650 metres long from east to west and around 200 metres wide at its greatest north-south width. It was secluded and quiet; no major roads passed through it. The village's growth was hindered by its poor water supply. Only a single spring (now called "Mary's Well") surfaced at the end of the village.

We could suppose that Jesus followed his father's trade of a carpenter and that he would have had been involved in the same things as normal children: family, school, friends, work, play, church (synagogue). In biblical days, there were schools connected with the synagogues in which the boys were taught the Old Testament Scriptures. On the Sabbath day Jesus and his family would have gone to the synagogue to worship and he would have attended classes, something like our Sunday schools today.

The Gospel of Luke offers the only account of his childhood period. Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went to the Feast, according to custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but Mary and Joseph were unaware that he was missing. Thinking he was in the company of their group, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

We get more details of Jesus' adult life from the age of about 30 years (about 26 AD). The four gospels tell us that Jesus' first adult act was to be baptized by John the Baptist, a charismatic and austere person who called people to repentance and baptised those who responded. This event marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

After the baptism, several of John's followers left to follow Jesus. Jesus then selected several others until he had established a group of 12 disciples. Jesus then spent from one to three years teaching and working miracles among his disciples and before large crowds. His recorded miracles included turning water to wine, walking on water, healing the sick, multiplying a small meal to feed a crowd, casting out demons, and even raising a man from the dead.

The teachings of Jesus focused primarily on the "the kingdom of God" and were usually told by creating parables, or stories, which drew on familiar images from local life. He rebuked the hypocrisy of some Jewish leaders and taught the importance of love and kindness, even to one's enemies.

Jesus' popularity grew quickly, but so did opposition from local leaders. Roman rulers were uncomfortable with the common perception that he was the Messiah who would liberate the Jews from Roman rule. Jewish leaders were upset by Jesus' very different interpretations of Jewish law, his power with the people, and the idea that he had been alluding to his own divinity.

In the Gospels Jesus repeatedly suggests to his disciples that his end is near, but they do not fully understand or accept this idea. The clearest expression of this is at the "Last Supper," which took place on the night before his death. All four Gospels record Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples, asking them to "do this in remembrance of me." Christians still celebrate this event in the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Communion.

On this evening Jesus also predicts that one of the disciples will betray him, which is met with astonishment and denial. But that very night, Jesus' fate was sealed when Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples and possibly the group's treasurer, led Roman soldiers to Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. As they arrested Jesus, the ever-colourful Peter defended his master with a sword, slicing off the ear of a centurion. But he was rebuked by Jesus, who admonished, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

Jesus was brought before the Jewish chief priests for trial. When questioned, he said very little but affirmed he was the Messiah. He was then judged worthy of death for blasphemy and handed over to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, for punishment. Although reluctant to condemn Jesus for reasons not entirely clear, Pilate sentenced Jesus to death at the insistence of the mob that had gathered. According to Matthew, when Judas learned of the sentence he threw his silver coins into the temple and hanged himself.

Jesus was brutally beaten, clothed in a mock-royal purple robe and crown of thorns, then executed by crucifixion at Golgotha (The Place of the Skull). This method of execution, apparently a Roman invention, entailed nailing or tying the victim's hands and feet to a wooden cross. It produced a slow, painful death by asphyxiation.

Jesus died at about the age of thirty three.

## Joseph

Joseph was the husband of Mary. He was a direct descendant of David, an ancient king of Israel. He was a gracious man who kept the laws of Judaism and was well respected. He was a man of meagre means but none the less, an honourable and faithful man.

It is highly unlikely that he could read or write, but he was skilled as a carpenter and lived in the small town of Nazareth. We assume that he spent time teaching his son the trade as well as providing spiritual training. Jesus is described as working and being taught by Joseph in his carpenter's shop. This was an inherited occupation that Jesus performed before going into his ministry.

Joseph observed the Holy Days and Hebrew Feasts with his family.

Little detail of Joseph is given in the Gospels so because Jesus entrusted Mary to the care of John on his death, we can speculate that Joseph may have died a natural death between their visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve, but before the Baptism of Jesus when He was thirty. It is clear that others recognized Joseph as the legal and earthly father of Jesus.

Joseph's influence during those early years must have been incredible. When Jesus spoke of God as being like a loving Father, he could draw from his youth the kind of love he must have had from Joseph. Joseph stands as a testimony to the value of integrity, obedience, faithfulness, and especially to honouring the entrusted role of "fatherhood."



## Mary

Mary was the mother of Jesus.

Roman Catholic, and the Orthodox churches venerate Mary. This veneration mostly takes the form of prayer for intercession with her Son, Jesus Christ. She is also one of the most highly venerated saints in both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches; and several major feast days of the liturgical year are devoted to her. Anglican and Protestant churches don't place quite as much emphasis on this intercessional role, more simply regarding her as the woman who was chosen by God to become the mother of Jesus.

Mary was a young girl, probably only about 14 to 16 years old when the angel Gabriel came and told her that she would give birth to a child. She was initially very afraid, never having expected to hear the most incredible news — that she would have a child, and her son would be the Messiah. Although she could not comprehend how she would conceive the Saviour, she responded to God with belief and obedience.

She had recently become betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. Mary was an ordinary Jewish girl, looking forward to marriage. Suddenly her life would forever be changed. In most cases, the Jews differentiate two periods in marriage: the agreement on the marriage and the marriage itself. The first period, the agreement on the marriage, is called betrothal or engagement.

Betrothal settled up the agreement between the two families. The two families were linked together by the payment of the mohar, which was a gift from the husband-to-be to the family of his "promised in marriage". Probably this agreement was accompanied by a special feast. The woman "promised in marriage" wasn't yet called a "wife", but her status was nevertheless changed by this prior agreement. All infidelity was severely punished, because she was undermining established rights. Betrothal could last quite a long time, and in this case, the "promised in marriage" was exempt from military service.

Joseph and Mary's betrothal can be explained according to these institutions. Mary had been promised in marriage to Joseph. He hadn't taken her to his home, or more generally speaking they hadn't lived together yet, when he realized she was expecting a baby. He had the legal right to breach the contract and even thought of doing so discreetly, but a divine intervention changed his mind.

Having to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the time when she was nine months pregnant would have been very arduous for Mary. This is a distance of over 120 kilometres. Tradition has it because she was heavily pregnant, Mary rode on a donkey while Joseph walked. A fit man leading this donkey could have, at a guess, travelled perhaps 25 kilometres a day. However, some people think that Joseph must have been an older man and past his prime. Perhaps the best guess is that this journey would have taken at least a week. The journey back with a little baby to carry would have been just as hard.

God knew that Mary was a woman of rare strength and obedience. She was the only human being to be with Jesus throughout his entire life — from his birth until his death. She gave birth to him as her baby and watched him die on the cross. Mary also knew the Scriptures. When the angel appeared and told her the baby would be God's Son, Mary replied, "I am the Lord's servant ... may it be to me as you have said." She knew of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Mary must have known that her submission to God's plan would cost her. If nothing else, she knew she would be disgraced as an unwed mother. She must have thought that Joseph would divorce her, or worse yet, he might even have her put to death by stoning. Mary may not have considered the full extent of her future suffering. She may not have imagined the pain of watching her beloved child bear the weight of sin and die a terrible death on the cross. Still, she willingly submitted to God's plan.

## Manger

The manger, or feeding trough, is the place where Baby Jesus slept. It is a part of every nativity scene.

In biblical days, mangers were made of wood or carved stone and were used to hold food for animals (as in a stable). Mangers are mostly used in livestock raising. They are also used to feed wild animals, as in nature reserves. The word comes from the French manger (meaning "to eat"), or from Latin manducare (meaning "to chew").

We know that Mary placed Jesus in a manger. She probably did this because she exhausted after giving birth and was tired of holding her baby. The manger was probably the only thing nearby that was a suitable shape (like a modern crib) for holding a little baby snugly and securely.

However, contrary to common belief, Jesus may not have been born in a stable. The bible simply says that he was born at an inn and that Mary laid him in a manger – not necessarily in a stable amongst the animals. The animals that were there certainly wouldn't have been farmyard animals as we see in some nativity scenes. The manger would have been set up as a feeding trough for the animals that brought the guests to the inn – mainly donkeys, oxen and other beasts of burden.

Next time you see a picture where the manger is represented as a form of crib (sometimes, complete with rockers), recognise that this is just a romantic Christmas fantasy. The truth of the original manger is much less opulent.

## Myrrh

Myrrh was one of the gifts of the Magi or Wise Men. Legend says Caspar brought the gift of myrrh from Europe or Tarsus and placed it before the Christ Child.

Myrrh is an aromatic gum resin that oozes from gashes cut in the bark of a small desert tree known as Commifera Myrrha or the Dindin tree. The myrrh hardens into tear-dropped shaped chunks and is then powdered or made into ointments or perfumes. This tree is 1.5 to 3 metres tall and about 30 cm in diameter.

Myrrh was an extremely valuable commodity during biblical times and was imported from India and Arabia. Myrrh was used in the embalming or anointing of the dead. The Israelites used it in their funeral preparations to postpone the decay and alleviate the odours of the deceased.

Myrrh also has many medicinal uses. In ancient times it was used for cleaning wounds and sores. As late as the 19th century it was given as a treatment for worms, coughs, colds, sore throats, asthma, indigestion, bad breath, gum disease, and venereal disease. Today it is still a common ingredient in toothpaste and mouthwash.

Until the invention of morphine and other modern painkillers, myrrh was a common analgesic. In ancient times it was often mixed with wine to make the drink more potent. Jesus Christ was offered "wine mingled with myrrh" to ease the pains of the cross although he refused to drink it.

## Nativity Scene

A nativity is a display of the manger scene where Christ was born in the manger in Bethlehem. I always get a very warm feeling as I watch little children view a nativity scene; their eyes are open and alight with interest and their comments and ideas about the arrival of the baby Jesus are just gorgeous.

People erect nativity scenes in homes and churches during the Christmas season. The scene shows figures depicting the infant Jesus resting in a manger, with Mary, and Joseph nearby. Other figures in the scene may include angels, shepherds, various animals, the three wise men and perhaps the Star of Bethlehem.

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene in 1223 at Greccio, Italy, in an attempt to place the emphasis of Christmas upon the worship of Christ rather than upon secular materialism and gift giving. (You probably thought that materialism was only a recent 20th and 21st Century phenomena?) It was staged in a cave near Greccio, St. Francis' nativity scene was a living one with humans and animals cast in the Biblical roles. Pope Honorius III gave his blessing to this exhibit.

Over the years, the romance of the display has made the nativity scene more and more popular, to the point where it no longer represents true historical accuracy.

While there were shepherds at the manger, there weren't any wise men. As you can read in the section about the wise men, we have no idea as to how many there really were. It could have been three, or twenty-three! The Bible simply says that the wise men brought three gifts, gold frankincense and myrrh. It is more likely that since these were common currency items of value that each wise man, regardless of the actual number, brought a little of all three. There may have been three, but this is not really defined.

Another glaring error in all the nativity scenes is that the wise men were certainly not at the manger on the night that Jesus was born. The Bible says that the wise men came to Jesus' house! It seems clear that the wise men came just prior to the time Herod issued his decree to slaughter all the children under two years. The star first appeared to the wise men when Jesus was born, but it led the wise men to Jesus' house.

The Bible doesn't say the star shone over the manger. This was a sign only the wise men could discern. The wise men started their journey when the star first appeared on Jesus' birth. Being from the "east" most likely Persia or Mesopotamia (now the country that we call Iraq), To travel 800 kilometres, would take over three weeks.

## Shepherds

At that time of the birth of Jesus, the job of the shepherd was the lowest, and least skilled of jobs. Shepherds were ordinary, simple men who had the responsibility of looking after sheep; themselves not being the brightest of animals.

Simple as they were, shepherds were an important part of the economy. The sheep in their care provided wool for clothing, milk and meat for the table as well as sacrifices for the temple. Unlike farmers, shepherds were often wage earners, being paid to watch the sheep of others. Shepherds lived apart from society. Their job was largely nomadic. Shepherds were mostly solitary males without children - often the younger sons of farming peasants who did not inherit any land. Perhaps some were members of a farming family, often a child, youth or an elder who couldn't help much with harder work. In some ways, they were outcasts. Their job required that they work remotely and as a result, they were unable to attend rites of purification and engage in normal religious activity.

Farmers would have lived in the town, keeping some animals such as donkeys, oxen, chickens and growing crops, vines and olives. They would also have owned a few sheep. These required pasture for feeding and needed to move from one area to another for feeding. This led to the development of a profession separate from that of the farmer. The duty of shepherds was to keep their flock intact and protect it from wolves and other predators. The shepherd was also to supervise the migration of the flock and ensured they made it to market areas in time for shearing. In ancient times shepherds also commonly milked their sheep, and made cheese from this milk.

Their day-to-day equipment might have consisted of a bag made of a full goat's skin, with legs tied, in which was carried food or other items, a sling for defending themselves and the flock against wild animals. Perhaps they carried a flute for entertaining themselves and their sheep. a cloak that was also used for night-time bedding, a stick (rod) about a yard/meter long with a knob on one end, a staff, or "shepherd's crook," that looked somewhat like a modern cane.

Imagine being one of these very simple men and watching over the flock at night when a host of angels appear. No wonder they were afraid!

The angels words told them of the birth of Jesus and how they could recognise him in a very crowded town. We don't know the names of the angels or how many there were of them, but in the Bible it says that there were a mass of them. It would have been an amazing experience – awesome in the literal sense of the word.

There's a key question that you might well ask here. Why would the birth of the Christ Child be announced to a group of humble shepherds and not to someone noble and important?

I think that the answer to this question comes in two parts. They both revolve around the concept of credibility and relevance.

Sheep herding was an honoured profession and had been conducted in Israel for thousands of years. Many important historical Jewish figures including Abraham, Moses and Isaac had been shepherds. In fact, a thousand years before, David had been a shepherd on the very hills that these shepherds were now on. It was David who wrote the beautiful 23rd Psalm that pictures the Lord as his shepherd, and God's people as the sheep. Announcing the birth to the shepherds would mean that the story of the birth was firstly credible.

Shepherds did not have high social standing or wealth. They were even perceived as outcasts in a strict regimented religious society. Announcing the birth to ordinary people such as these made Jesus' birth relevant to all people; not just the religious, the nobility or those with high social standing.

## Star of Bethlehem

The Wise Men followed the mysterious Star of the East, also called the Star of Bethlehem to worship Jesus.

For more information, see the section on the Christmas Star.

## Three Wise Men

Throughout this book I have referred to the Wise Men using an alternative term; 'Magi'. As I've said elsewhere, there probably weren't three of them, and they were probably not present at the nativity. Matthew's Gospel in the Bible simply says that they were astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire. Therefore the term Magi is a more appropriate term for them.

It was in the 6th century, that the wise men became to be referred to as kings in popular imagination. This assumption was derived by early Christians from a number of old testament prophecies that forecast happenings such as in Isaiah where it is written that "Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship".

The number of 'kings' in the Christmas story has varied over time. - usually being two, four, or twelve. Eventually, the number three was settled upon because of the three gifts they bore and the twelve wise men became known as the "Three Wise Men" or "The Three Kings of the Orient" When we sing the Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are", we sing about them and their gifts .

According to medieval legend the names of three were Melchior, 'King' of Arabia, who brought gold; Gaspar, 'King' of Tarsus, who brought myrrh; and Balthasar, 'King' of Ethiopia, who brought frankincense. These three names do not come from the Bible and did not appear in any Christian literature until five hundred years or so after the birth of Jesus.

We commonly see images of these wise men worshiping Jesus in the manger, but two passages in the Bible, along with a practical understanding of travel distances make this unlikely. According to Mathew, the wise men came "into the house" and saw "the young Child with Mary His mother". The references to "Young Child" and "House" suggest that this was at some time later than Jesus' birth. Mathew also wrote that King Herod put to death all the male children who were "two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men." These references make it seem more likely that Jesus was a toddler at the time of the wise men's visit.

It is a custom in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Sweden for three boys to visit homes on the Epiphany. The initials C.M.B. are written over the doors of the homes and three crosses are drawn, also. C.M.B. are the initials of the three Wise Men named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Legend has it that this will bring good fortune in the new year to the people who live there.

## Twelve Days of Christmas

My first introduction to the twelve days of Christmas was through singing the carol of the same name.

Eventually, I discovered that this concept refers to the number of days between Christmas Day on December 25th (When Jesus was born) to the beginning of Epiphany on January 6th. This is the day on which it was assumed that the Magi (Wise Men) visited Jesus.

There is some dispute as to whether the twelve days should include December 25th and therefore finish on January 5th, or whether counting begins on the day after December 25th so that the twelfth day is January 6th. This dispute seems to rely on the extent to which the person doing the counting is a member of one of the traditional liturgical churches. The origin and counting of the Twelve Days is complicated, and is related to differences in calendars, church traditions, and ways to observe this holy day in various cultures.

By the 16th century, some European and Scandinavian cultures had combined the Twelve Days of Christmas with (sometimes pagan) festivals celebrating the changing of the year. These were usually associated with driving away evil spirits for the start of the New Year.

The Twelfth Night is January 5th, the last day of the Christmas Season before Epiphany (January 6th). Tradition has it, that on the Day after Twelfth night, it is time to take down the Christmas decorations. French and English celebrations of Twelfth Night included a King's Cake, remembering the visit of the Three Magi, and ale or wine. In some cultures, the King's Cake is part of the celebration of the day of Epiphany.

The popular carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is usually seen as simply a nonsense song for children with secular origins. However, some have suggested that it is a song of Christian instruction, perhaps dating to the 16th century religious wars in England, with hidden references to the basic teachings of the Christian Faith. It is suggested that this song was used as a way of teaching the Catholic faith in England in the days when Roman Catholicism was forbidden to be practiced by King Henry 8th. In this way, they contend that the song is a mnemonic device to teach the catechism to youngsters. (The catechism is a summary of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for the instruction of Christians). The "true love" mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God Himself. The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptised person who is part of the Christian Faith. Each of the "days" represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn.

However, many have questioned the historical accuracy of this origin of the song. Some have tried to debunk this as an "urban myth", and others have tried to deal with this account of the song's origin in the name of historical accuracy. (There is little "hard" evidence available to support either view. Some church historians affirm this account

as basically accurate, while others point out apparent historical and logical discrepancies. However, this should not prevent us from using the song in celebration of Christmas.

As we know, many of the symbols of Christianity were not originally religious, including even the present date of Christmas Day. They were appropriated from contemporary culture of the time by the Christian Faith as methods of worship and proclamation. Perhaps, when all is said and done, historical accuracy is not really the point. Perhaps more important is that at Christmas we can celebrate our rich heritage, and faith through one more avenue.

Now, when you next hear what you may have thought as a secular "nonsense song," think about the meaning of its words:

### **The Twelve Days of Christmas**

"On the first day of Christmas my true love (God) gave to me a partridge (Jesus) in a pear tree.

"On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me two turtle doves (The Old and New Testaments)

"On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me three French hens (Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues)

"On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me four calling birds (the four Gospels)

"On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me five golden rings (The first five books of the Old Testament)

"On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me six geese a-laying (the six days of creation)

"On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me seven swans a-swimming (the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit)

"On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me eight maids a-milking (the eight beatitudes)

"On the ninth day of Christmas my true love gave to me nine ladies dancing (the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit)

"On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me ten lords a-leaping (the ten commandments)

"On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me eleven pipers piping (the eleven faithful apostles)

"On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me twelve drummers drumming (the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed)".

### **Xmas**

My mother always told me to spell the word Christmas in its entirety and not to abbreviate it to Xmas because this was disrespectful.

However, this abbreviation for Christmas is of Greek origin. The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. During the 16th century, Europeans began using the first initial of Christ's name, "X" in place of the word Christ in Christmas as a shorthand form of the word.

# CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

## Adelaide Christmas Pageant

The Adelaide Christmas Pageant Parade is held annually in the South Australian capital of Adelaide. It is the largest event of its kind in the world, attracting crowds of over 400,000 people. It began in 1933 with the pageant being staged in early November, and usually on a Saturday morning.

The pageant consists of a procession of floats, bands and clowns and it culminates with the arrival of Santa Claus. The parade takes place in the city centre, along a route just over 3 kilometres in length. It commences on King William Street and concludes on North Terrace, outside Rundle Mall, from where Santa proceeds to the Magic Cave in the David Jones department store.

This pageant was founded by Sir Edward Hayward, owner of the Adelaide department store John Martin's, He was inspired by the Toronto Santa Claus Parade and Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

During the Second World War, the pageant was not held, but it was restored in 1945. By 1969, the event had grown significantly, with attendances reaching 500,000 people and the first live telecast.. In the mid 1990s, when John Martins was taken over by David Jones Limited, the South Australian Government acquired the event. It sought sponsorship from the South Australian business community, and sold naming rights to various credit unions.

In 2008 there was a Guinness world record attempt for the longest and largest Mexican Wave but it failed to make the numbers.

## Advent Calendar

The Advent wreath is a Christian tradition that symbolises the passage of the four weeks of Advent in the church calendar.

Advent comes from the Latin word 'Adventus' meaning coming. This is the season immediately before Christmas in which the church waits and prepares for the birth of Jesus and also for his 'second' Advent (or return). Advent commences on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day and marks the beginning of the liturgical (worshiping) year. In Eastern churches, it begins on September 1st.

You've probably seen advent calendars in the newsagents and department stores. They are those cards with pictures and little doors, or windows, which open to reveal an image, a poem, or part of a story such as the Nativity story. Some more elaborate advent calendars have a small gift concealed in each window, such as a toy or a chocolate item. They are used to count or celebrate the days of advent in anticipation of Christmas. Some calendars are strictly religious, whereas others are more worldly in content. One window is opened each day of Advent. Today, most advent calendars are made for children.

The origins of the Advent calendar come from German Lutherans who, at least as early as the beginning of the 19th century, would physically count down the 24 days of Advent. Often this meant simply drawing a chalk line on the door each day, beginning on December 1. Some families had more elaborate means of marking the days, such as lighting a new candle (perhaps the genesis of today's Advent wreath) or hanging a little religious picture on the wall each day.

The first known Advent calendar was handmade in 1851. According to the Austrian Landesmuseum, the first printed Advent calendar was produced in Hamburg around 1902 or 1903. Other authorities state that a Swabian parishioner, Gerhard Lang, was responsible for the first printed calendar, in 1908.

Lang was certainly the creator of today's form of Advent calendar. He was a printer in the firm Reichhold & Lang of Munich who, in 1908, made 24 little coloured pictures that could be affixed to a piece of cardboard. Several years later, he introduced a calendar with 24 little doors. He created and marketed at least 30 designs before his firm went out of business in the 1930s. In this same time period, Sankt Johannis Printing Company started producing religious Advent calendars, with Bible verses instead of pictures behind the doors.

The practice disappeared during World War II, apparently to save paper. After the war, Richard Sellmer of Stuttgart resurrected the commercial Advent calendar and is responsible for its widespread popularity. His company, Richard Sellmer Verlag, today maintains a stock of over 1,000,000 calendars worldwide. His company has now been established as one of the biggest sellers of advent produce.

## Advent Wreath

By the Middle Ages, Christians had adapted this tradition of creating a wreath which was set with candles as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. This matched the idea that Christ is "the Light that came into the world" to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God". By 1600, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath. Its real origins are uncertain. Some pre-Christian Germanic peoples used wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. In Scandinavia during Winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn "the wheel of the earth" back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

The traditional wreath is made of various evergreens, which signify continuous life. Originally, wreaths were made of Laurel leaves and these signify victory over persecution and suffering. The symbolism of victory is why the ancient Greeks gave laurel wreaths to the winners of competitions in the original Olympic Games. In the same way, a wreath is presented to the winners on the Formula 1 Podium. Decorations of pine, holly, and yew, represent immortality; and cedar, represents strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. In Australia, none of these plants are native to our country so we have to make do with substitutes – artificial wreaths, or plants from our native bush.

Set on the branches of the wreath are four candles: three purple candles and one pink candle. In the centre of the wreath sits a white candle. As a whole, these candles represent the coming of the light of Christ into the world.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the first purple candle is lit. This candle is typically called the prophecy candle in remembrance of the prophets, primarily Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Christ. This candle represents hope or expectation in anticipation of the coming Messiah. Each week on Sunday, an additional candle is lit. On the second Sunday of Advent, the second purple candle is lit. This candle typically represents love. Some traditions call this the Bethlehem candle, symbolizing Christ's manger. On the third Sunday of Advent the pink, or rose-colored candle is lit. This pink candle is customarily called the Shepherds' candle and it represents joy. The fourth and last purple candle, oftentimes called the Angel's candle, represents peace and is lit on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

On Christmas Eve, the white centre candle is traditionally lit. This candle is called the Christ candle and represents the life of Christ that has come into the world. The colour of white represents purity. Christ is the sinless, spotless, pure Saviour. Also, those who receive Christ as Saviour are washed of their sins and made whiter than snow.

In December, 1839, the first verifiable public Advent wreath was hung in the prayer hall of the Rauhes Haus (relief house) in Hamburg, although it had been a family practice in parts of German-speaking Europe since the 17th century.

## Boxing Day

In English-speaking countries, we know the day following Christmas Day as 'Boxing Day'.

We don't call it Boxing Day because its the day set aside for pugilists (boxers) to belt into each other, nor is it essential for everyone to wear their boxer shorts.

There are several reasons for this name:

In the medieval days in England, churches kept a locked alms box in which donations were collected for the poor and needy. The box was then opened on December the 26th, the day after Christmas, and the money distributed on what became known as "Boxing Day".

Perhaps following on from the idea of giving gifts to the poor, in feudal England, after all the families had gathered together for Christmas festivities, the serfs with families in tow, would visit their lord at his manor house where under obligation, he would bestow upon them a box of goods such as grains, cloth and tools. Because of the boxes being given out, the day was called Boxing Day.

Another explanation suggests that because servants had to work on Christmas Day, they were given the following day off. Unable to be with their own families to work on a such a traditional religious holiday and unable to have Christmas Dinner, the left over food from Christmas Day was boxed up and given to the servants and their families.

Later on in time, servants would carry boxes to their employers when they arrived for their day's work on the day after Christmas. Their employers would then put coins in the boxes as special end-of-year gifts similar to today's Christmas bonus.

So there you have it. The term, Boxing Day, comes from a number of the customs which started in England in the Middle Ages, - around 800 years ago. The tradition continues today throughout the British Commonwealth countries - small gifts are often given to delivery workers such as postal staff, the garbo and children who deliver newspapers.

December 26 also coincides with the Christian day set aside to celebrate the death of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr who was stoned to death in Jerusalem around A.D. 34 – 35. St. Stephen's Day is celebrated in a number of European countries but in Australia we are much more familiar with Boxing Day and its status as a public holiday which gives us another day off work.

## Carols by Candlelight

We Australians have many ways to celebrate Christmas. Some of us near the coast have a party on the beach, for others Christmas is a backyard BBQ followed by a game of cricket. Many have the traditional hot Christmas Dinner with all the family.

Regardless of how we spend the day, we approach Christmas differently in Australia because it occurs in our summer rather than in the winter. We are typically outdoors people and one of the lead up events is Carols by Candlelight, which was actually an idea created in Melbourne.

It began in 1938 by Norman Banks, a famous radio announcer of the day who could be heard on the then Melbourne radio station of 3KZ. Whilst he was walking home from his night-time radio shift on Christmas Eve in 1937, he passed a window and saw inside an elderly woman sitting up in bed, listening to Away in a Manger being played on the radio and singing along. Her face was lit by candlelight. Wondering how many others spent Christmas alone, he had the idea to stage an event in which a large group of people could all sing Christmas carols together by candlelight.

The first of these events was held in the Alexandra Gardens, not far from the present rowing sheds on the Yarra River and 10,000 people attend. Following World War II, many people began to sing the Carols and in the 1960's when the Myer Music Bowl was built, they moved to their new, and current home.

Since their inception, millions of dollars have been raised through Carols by Candlelight for the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, now called Vision Australia.

Similar carol singing events are now held all over Australia and in many cities around the world. They are usually arranged by churches, municipal councils and other community groups.

In Sydney, Carols in the Domain are held on the night before Christmas Eve. They and the Melbourne Carols By Candlelight are televised live to many Australian cities, some of the Pacific Islands and New Zealand, live.

In Brisbane the Lord Mayor's Christmas Carols are held about a week before Christmas, at the Brisbane River Stage in the Brisbane City Botanic Gardens.

In Perth, Carols by Candlelight are held in mid December in the Supreme Court Gardens, while other events are held at Fremantle, Scarborough and Rockingham.

In Adelaide, Carols by Candlelight is held in the weeks before Christmas in Elder Park on the banks of the River Torrens.

In Hobart, there are three main carols services - one each in Clarence, Glenorchy and the main ceremony in Sandown Park in Sandy Bay, Hobart itself.

## Christmas Boar

It might sound funny to us now that our traditional Christmas food is turkey or ham, but a very old tradition was to have boar, or wild pig for Christmas dinner.

This tradition goes right back to Norse folklore where boar was served in Valhalla, the mythical hall where Odin received the souls of heroes who had fallen in battle. The Celts kept this tradition (as well as being the suppliers for pork and bacon throughout Europe) making it more popular than the readily available beef or mutton for celebrations. Hunting the Christmas boar became an annual sport in England.



After proper preparation, the boar's head would be brought into the dining hall (often depicted with an apple in its mouth) with a great fanfare. The entire household would then sing "The Boar's Head Carol" (dating from 1521) which is now the oldest printed Christmas carol in existence..

In Scandinavia, the custom was to take the last sheaf of corn from the harvest and bake it into a loaf shaped like a boar. This bread-shaped boar loaf remained on the table until the crops are all sown in the spring. Then it was mixed with seed corn and part is given to the ploughman and part to the animals.

Having a Christmas ham is now the closest that we get to this old custom.

## Christmas Bon Bons (or Crackers)

Christmas crackers or bon-bons are an integral part of Christmas celebrations in the western countries of the British Commonwealth – predominantly Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, other Commonwealth countries. They are also found in Ireland and some countries of the former Soviet Union.

A cracker is made from a cardboard tube which is wrapped in a brightly decorated twist of paper to make it resemble an oversized sweet-wrapper. The cracker is pulled by two people, and, much in the manner of pulling a wishbone, the cracker generally splits quite unevenly. The split is accompanied by a small bang produced by the effect of friction on a chemically impregnated card strip (similar to that used in a cap gun).

In some cultures, the person who ends up with the larger portion of cracker empties the contents from the tube and keeps them. I think that is much better for each person will have their own cracker and will keep its contents regardless of whose end they were in. That makes it fair and the little kids don't miss out.

One of the things that you'll find in a bon-bon is a poorly fitting coloured paper hat that either slips down over your eyes, or otherwise just sits on top of the crown and then slides off as you bend over to pick up a piece of that nice turkey from your dinner plate. They also have a small toy or other trinket and a motto, a joke or piece of trivia on a little strip of paper. I rather like these jokes. They are only found funny by people with a very simple level of intelligence, but I do rely on them as a source of humour when I'm telling jokes over the following months. Predictably, no one ever laughs at them.

Crackers were invented by Tom Smith of London in 1847, as a development of his bon-bon sweets, which he sold in a twist of paper (the origins of the traditional sweet-wrapper). They were originally called 'Cosaques' (ie Cossack) but the onomatopoeic "cracker" soon became the commonly used name, as rival varieties were introduced to the market.

Christmas lunch, or dinner, simply wouldn't be the same without bon-bons!

## Christmas Cake

There is a strong connection between Christmas Cake and Plum Pudding, so you'll need to read both sections in this book together to see how one evolved into the other. Over time, the traditional plum pudding became used as a cake at Christmas. Then as we moved on further, the plums were eventually replaced with dried fruit and other ingredients.

Traditional Christmas cake is a fruit cake, which as we know it, is mostly made up of a preserved fruit mixture with nuts and laced with rum or whiskey or brandy. It is a modern day creation, perhaps just over 200 years old.

It originates from a porridge, the origins of which go back to the beginnings of Christianity. Porridge, the original form of plum pudding. was used as a festive food for many centuries and when fine milled wheat flour became available in England during Victorian days, a fruit cake began to be baked in the castles and mansions where an oven was affordable.. This early fruit cake was made with flour, sugar, eggs as well as plums, raisins, nuts and preserved in alcohol. It was usually reserved for weddings and very special occasions, and made well in advance of the big event.

If you can remember your own wedding day, you'll remember that it was very hectic. To get everything ready for the big day, preparations had to be done in advance. Making the cake was a big job - one best not done the day before the ceremony. The best method was to make a cake in such a way that it could be preserved for a longer period of time and alcohol was a great preservative – and festive to boot!

This dark Christmas fruit cake became popular all over the world, where kids especially love it. Christmas cakes and puddings have become an essential Christmas ritual today. People gift each other Christmas cakes to symbolize sharing happiness and cheer during the holiday season.

## Christmas Cake Recipe

Many people have a favourite recipe for Christmas Cake. If you don't have one of your own, try this one from my Mum (Brandy was the only form of alcohol that she ever had in her house and it was strictly only for the Christmas Cake).

### *Ingredients*

10g (3 cups) sultanas

265g (1 1/2 cups) Sunbeam flame raisins

155g (1 cup) currants

150g (1 cup) pitted dates, finely chopped

1 x 100g pkt red glace cherries, quartered

5g (1/2 cup) dried cranberries

75g (1/2 cup) dried pineapple, finely chopped

50g (1/4 cup) mixed peel

185ml (3/4 cup) brandy

2 tsp finely grated orange rind

Melted butter, to grease

250g butter, at room temperature

200g (1 cup, firmly packed) brown sugar

4 eggs

300g (2 cups) plain flour

2 tsp mixed spice

Blanched almonds, to decorate

Red glace cherries, extra, halved, to decorate

2 tbs brandy, extra

### **Method**

Combine sultanas, raisins, currants, dates, cherries, cranberries, pineapple, mixed peel, brandy and orange rind in a large bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside, stirring occasionally, for 2 days to macerate.

Preheat oven to 150°C. Brush a round 22cm (base measurement) cake pan with melted butter to lightly grease. Line the base and side with 3 layers of non-stick baking paper.

Use an electric beater to beat butter and sugar in a bowl until pale and creamy. Add eggs, 1 at a time, beating well between each addition until just combined. Add butter mixture to fruit mixture and stir to combine. Add flour and mixed spice and stir until well combined. Spoon into prepared pan and smooth the surface. Lightly tap pan on bench top to release any air bubbles. Arrange almonds and cherries on top of the cake.

Bake in oven, covered with foil, for 2 hours 40 minutes to 3 hours or until a skewer inserted into centre comes out clean. Drizzle hot cake with extra brandy. Set aside to cool before turning out.

### **Notes & tips**

You can make this cake up to 3 months ahead. Cover it with plastic wrap and store in an airtight container in a cool, dark place.

## Christmas Cards

The Romans had a custom of exchanging gifts and greetings on the first day of January. Early Christians continued this and in some cases did it in the style of what we would call a "New Year's Card." They were sent out after December 25 and were originally not connected with Christmas at all. Their purpose was to arrive at their destination on New Year's Day! The Christmas card represents a sophisticated evolution of this ancient custom of giving blessings or good wishes for the New Year.

The custom of sending Christmas cards started in Britain in 1840 when the introduction of the 'Penny Post' made it affordable to send letters. By 1850 the wealthier classes of England were sending short seasonal greetings to friends through a poem that was engraved within an ornamental framework on a card. These were expensive and it wasn't until 1862 when the stationers Messrs Charles Goodall, began to print cheap plain greeting cards which looked like a postcard.

By the end of the decade the invention of the lithographic printing process enabled cards to become decorated. By then, other stationery firms had entered the Christmas Card market and in 1878 the volume of cards sent through the mail was sufficient for the British Post Office to commence a separate record of Christmas mail.

The Victorian era in England was an elaborate time for Christmas cards with frosting, cut edges, lace paper and other creative decorations. Some more elaborate cards had jewelled embossed tops, tassels and fringes. In the 1890s cards had become very popular and they have continued to increase in numbers ever since.

The first Christmas card printer in America was Lewis Prang in Roxbury, Massachusetts. His artwork featured biblical nativity scenes, popular images and characters like Santa Claus, along with social events like shopping and hanging stockings on the mantelpiece..

Eventually people in England began to combine these seasonal greetings into one, with Christmas greetings being the priority over those for the New Year. Today we often send out cards that state, "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year" or just "Season's Greetings". In America, the protests of civil liberties groups, have caused Christmas card manufacturers (and some companies) to not even include the word Christmas anymore, but instead just say "Happy Holidays".

I think that it is rather fortunate that with all of our multi-culturalism in Australia, we still call this season ""Christmas"". Sending cards to friends and family is well and truly part of our Australian tradition. Who knows however, how it will continue with the increased use of email and electronic forms of communication.

In 2007, Australia Post delivered 470 million Christmas articles.

## Christmas Carolling

I love singing Christmas Carols. I have the worst voice that you can imagine, but I feel confident to sing these great songs with gusto and enthusiasm. People seem to understand that it's OK to sound like a foghorn at Christmas time.

Christmas had been observed for over 800 years before the first carol had even been sung. People started carolling in medieval days by singing and dancing around a Christmas tree. Early carols weren't holy enough for singing inside a church, so carolling was done outside.

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. Early Christmas carols were not written down, they were just passed on by one person to another verbally.

The term 'Carol' eventually became used as a term used to describe late medieval English songs on various subjects which were composed with a series of verses and a refrain, or chorus, in between each verse. Caroling (singing carols in the street) is one of the oldest customs in Great Britain, going back to the Middle Ages when beggars, seeking food, money, or drink, would wander the streets singing Christmas songs.

We don't know when the first carol was written, but we do know that the time between 1350 and 1550 was the golden age of English carols. By then, carols were a popular form of religious song. Their themes mostly revolved around a saint, the Christ child or the Virgin Mary at times blending two languages such as English and Latin.

By the 15th century the carol was also considered as a form of artistic music. During this time elaborate arrangements were made and carols were considered an important contribution to English medieval music. The songs were written

for 3 or 4 voices and themes were mostly on the Passion of Christ. By the 16th century though, carols had declined in popularity.

In the 1600's, the popularity of carols declined and they almost disappeared. This was the time of the reformation and a period of Puritanism and religious conservatism. Christmas carols were banned between 1647 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day.

It wasn't until the middle of the 18th Century that we saw a revival in carol singing and it was then that most of the carols that we know today were written. It was about this time that carols were first sung in church. In earlier days, they were regarded as being too 'common' to be included in a church service and were sung outdoors.

One of our best known carols was written in 1818, by an Austrian priest Joseph Mohr. Legend has it that he was told the day before Christmas that the church organ was broken and would not be able to be fixed in time for Christmas Eve. He was saddened by this and could not think of Christmas without music, so he wanted to write a carol that could be sung by a choir to guitar music. He sat down and wrote three verses. Later that night the people in the little Austrian church sang "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night) for the first time.

Other carols that were written around the same time include: 'O Come all ye Faithful' (1843), 'Once in Royal David's City' (1848), 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' (1881) and 'Away in a Manger' (1883). "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" was first written in 1849 by Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian minister. "Joy to the World" was written by Issac Watts as part of his version of Psalm 98. The composer of the music for this carol is not known.

Over the years, the word 'carol' has changed in its meaning. Originally, the term applied to religious songs, but today, carols simply depict our Christmas lifestyle, whether religious or not. I still like to differentiate Christian 'carols' from those popular Christmas 'songs'. While they are both very popular, it seems to me that a song about the birth of Jesus such as 'Silent Night' is in a different category to a popular life-style song such as 'I Saw Mummy Kissing Santa Claus'. Christmas songs though, have never had an exclusive religious focus. In England, many rowdy Wassailing songs, or drinking songs, have been known from as far back as medieval days.

The exceptionally popular ballad 'White Christmas' by Irving Berlin is the biggest-selling Christmas song of all time. It was actually the biggest selling song of all time until recently when the song by the Beatles 'Yesterday' eventually sold more copies.

Australians have written carols as a way of making Christmas more relevant and to adapt some local heritage to the Christmas story. Some of these songs are simply 'kitsch' rewordings of traditional tunes but others are completely Australian compositions. Unfortunately, our Australian Christmas songs get little airtime and are generally swamped by the popular international songs. However they are loved by enthusiasts and people with a fondness for our local heritage.

Some of the better known Australian carols include 'Carol of the Birds' and John Wheeler's song, 'The Three Drovers'. Other fun and light-hearted Australian Christmas songs have become a common part of the Australian Christmas experience. These include Rolf Harris's 'Six White Boomers', Colin Buchanan's song, 'Aussie Jingle Bells' and the song, 'Australian Twelve Days of Christmas'.

## Christmas Colours

The two colours that we most readily associate with Christmas are red and green.

These colours were not inspired by holiday characters or festive decorations. Red doesn't come from the candy cane or Rudolf's nose or even Santa Claus's suit. Green didn't originate from Santa's elves, holiday wreaths or sprigs of holly. In fact, the convention of using red and green at Christmas began centuries ago.

In terms of Christian belief, the colour green is a natural representation of eternal life, specifically the evergreen tree and how it survives through the winter season. That's why, in Christian belief, green represents the eternal life of Jesus Christ. The colour red symbolizes Christ's blood that was shed during his crucifixion.

If we go back in history, during the 14th Century, churches often presented Miracle Plays. Because very few people could read, plays and re-enactments were important teaching processes. Traditionally on December 24, the church presented The Paradise Play, the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. Instead of using an apple tree, which wasn't available in winter, they fastened apples to the branches of a pine tree. Using a pine to represent the Tree of Good and Evil became a common practice among churches and they eventually began to incorporate the tree into their Christmas displays each year. Following the church's example, people began assembling pine trees in their homes and decorating them with red apples. This act introduced two modern traditions: the decorated Christmas tree and our seasonal colours, green for the pine tree and red for the apples.

While green and red may be the widely accepted colours denoting the Christmas season, these two individual colours have always had different meanings from one culture to the next.

Depending on where you are in the world, red can represent anything from anger and sin to fortune and fertility. In some countries, like China and India, red is worn at weddings. In central Africa, red symbolizes health and life, whereas in South Africa it's the colour of death and mourning. Red can represent power and status, a good example being the red carpet over which celebrity actors walk when they arrive to receive their Oscars. Roses and hearts associate red with love and passion, whereas traffic signs and stop signs associate it with danger and warning. And red is also a patriotic colour for many countries where it symbolises blood, sacrifice and courage.

Nowadays green has become the dominant colour of environmental movement, but like the colour red, it also has many other conflicting connotations. In the Middle Ages, green represented love and fertility, and brides often wore green on their wedding day. In some countries, green is considered the luckiest colour, because it represents fortune, wealth and prosperity. But in Ireland, where green is the national colour, it's actually considered unlucky. The Irish wear the colour in hopes that things will take a turn for the better. In most parts of the world, green represents life, growth and balance; however, in some countries, like South America, green is a symbol of death.

For us, green and red inspire warm thoughts of the Christmas season. But separately, they represent an entire world of different meanings.

## Christmas Eve

In Australia, Christmas Eve is not very important, other than as a day on which to prepare for Christmas Day.

However in Europe, December 24th is regarded as being the start of Christmas with Christmas Eve being more significant in many ways than Christmas Day itself. It's on Christmas Eve that the Yule log is solemnly lit and families gather for the most important meal of the entire Christmas season. It is on Christmas Eve, that Saint Nicholas, the predecessor to our modern day Santa arrives and stockings are hung on mantelpieces and filled when he visits.

There is a strong sense of the supernatural on Christmas Eve. An old Polish belief is that Christmas Eve is a time of family gathering and reconciliation. It's also a night of magic. Animals are said to talk in a human voice and people have the power to tell the future. There is also a French belief that on Christmas Eve, while the genealogy of Christ is being chanted at the Midnight Mass, hidden treasures are revealed. In Russia all sorts of buried treasures are supposed to be revealed on the evenings between Christmas and the Epiphany, and on the eves of these festivals the heavens are opened, and the waters of springs and rivers turn into wine. In Sweden the Trolls are believed to celebrate Christmas Eve with dancing and revelry.

Here in Australia, many Roman Catholics and Anglicans traditionally celebrate a midnight Mass, or Eucharist. This ceremony, which is held in churches across the country, marks the beginning of Christmas Day. A popular joke is to ask what time the Midnight Mass starts

Many families have their own Christmas Eve traditions too. Some have a complete ritual that is followed -- lights turned off except for Christmas tree lights, eating certain foods, opening of one gift, and so on. Others go to Carols by Candlelight, or just turn the tellie to watch it as they prepare for Christmas Day.

## Christmas in July

Christmas in July is a social function such as a lunch, dinner party or similar event that some people hold in the mid Australian Winter when our climate is at its coldest. This event tries to mimic the feeling of a traditional Christmas in the cold northern hemisphere. At these social functions, gifts may be given Santa Claus arrives and people feast and be merry as they would at Christmas time.

The earliest known Christmas in July celebration was in July 1933 at Camp Keystone, a girl's summer camp in North Carolina in America. The concept of Christmas in July was given some attention with the film Christmas in July which was made in 1940. In the movie, a man is fooled into believing he has won \$25,000 in an advertising slogan contest. He buys presents for family, friends and neighbours, and proposes marriage to his girlfriend.

Christmas in July seems to have started as a celebration in Australia in 1980 when a group of Irish tourists asked the owner of a hotel in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales to hold a party that they called "Yulefest".

Our Christmas in July is especially common as a marketing gimmick in the snowfields where the month of July coincides with the high season in the Australian skiing resorts, but the same type of function can be found in many other places around the country.

In Antarctica, our base at McMurdo Station in Antarctica celebrates Christmas in July, as well as in December. This is because it coincides with a resupply mission. July is in the middle of winter in Antarctica; high winds and ice once made it too dangerous for planes to land with supplies. Instead, planes parachuted deliveries (such as food and mail) to the ice; the sudden arrival in July of presents from the sky reminded some Antarctic expeditioners of a "visit from Santa." I think that any excuse for a party would be worth while in such a desolate and remote place.

## Christmas Seals

You might have seen, or perhaps purchased, decorative stickers or seals to go on Christmas cards or gift wrapping. Some people have confused them with stamps, but they are just decorative stickers and have no monetary value as far as the post office is concerned.

They were originally the idea of a Danish postal clerk Einar Holbøll, who thought by adding an extra charitable stamp on mailed holiday greetings during Christmas, he could raise money for charity. At the turn of the century, tuberculosis was a highly feared disease, and its effect on children was particularly horrible. Holbøll, decided that money raised from these sales could be used to help children sick with this disease. The plan was approved by the Postmaster and the King of Denmark. As a result, in 1904 the world's first Christmas Seal was issued, bearing the likeness of the Danish Queen (Louise of Hesse-Kassel) and the word Julen (Christmas). Over 4 million were sold in the first year.

Soon after Denmark issued the first Christmas seal, Sweden and Iceland followed. Seals then spread throughout Scandinavia and are still popular today. They have also been issued by Greenland, Norway, Finland, The Danish West Indies, The Virgin Islands, Estonia and The Faroe Islands.

Seals were introduced into the United States by Emily Bissell in 1907, after she had read about the program in an magazine article. The seals were sold at post offices, initially in Delaware at 1 cent each. Today's Christmas Seals benefit the American Lung Association and other lung related issues. Tuberculosis was declining, but recently has been on the rise. TB is still one of the most common major infectious diseases in the world.

Charitable organisations in Australia have printed Christmas seals over the years, with some of them becoming collectors items. Sheets of Lions Club Christmas Seals are available for sale on Ebay. Non charitable versions can be readily bought in stationery shops.

## Christmas Stamps

To understand the background of Christmas postage stamps, we need to once again return to England, the source of many of our Christmas traditions. It was not the first country to issue Christmas stamps, but it was the first country to have a proper postal service.

In the days before stamps, mail was free to send. Deliveries were paid by the receiver and as you can imagine, the post office lost a lot of money because people refused to pay for things that they didn't like to receive. In 1837, an English schoolmaster named Rowland Hill proposed the use of prepaid stamps. The post office issued the first stamps in 1840 – the One-Penny Black and Two Penny Blue stamps, both featuring Queen Victoria. In 1870, the British Post Office introduced a half penny stamp for sending cards.

Initially, these stamps were printed without perforations and people had to separate them individually using a knife or a pair of scissors. In 1847 an Irish engineer named Henry Archer submitted a plan to the British Post Office for perforating stamp sheets. By 1854 Archer's machine was sufficiently perfected to produce the first perforated stamps.

The first Christmas stamp was issued in Canada. It showed a map of the British Commonwealth with the words "Xmas 1898" inscribed at the bottom. There is some dispute as to whether this stamp was to celebrate Christmas, or to commemorate the Imperial Penny Postage system which began in that year.

Christmas stamps are a relatively new idea. In 1937, Austria issued two "Christmas greeting stamps" featuring a rose and zodiac signs. Then in 1939, Brazil issued four semi-postal stamps with designs featuring the three kings and a star, an angel and child, the Southern Cross and a child, and a mother and child. By 1941 Hungary had issued a semi-postal whose additional fees were to pay for "soldiers' Christmas". The first stamps to depict the Nativity were those issued by Hungary in 1943. These were all one-time issues, more like commemorative stamps than regular issues.

The next Christmas stamps did not appear until 1951, when Cuba issued designs with poinsettias and bells, followed by Haiti (1954), Luxembourg and Spain (1955), then Australia, Korea, and Liechtenstein (1957). Australia became the first country to print Christmas stamps on an annual basis. Many more nations took up the practice during the 1960s.

In 2007, over 450 million articles were handled by Australia Post during the month of December, 100 million of these being Christmas cards. Over 117,000 letters were sent by Australian Children to Santa Claus through the mail.

## Christmas Stocking

The tradition of placing gifts into Christmas stockings comes from another tradition regarding Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra.

There was a kindly nobleman whose wife had died of an illness leaving the nobleman and his three daughters in despair. After losing all his money in useless and bad inventions the family had to move into a peasant's cottage, where the daughters did their own cooking, sewing and cleaning.

When it came time for the daughters to marry, the father became even more depressed as his daughters could not marry without dowries, money and property given to the new husband's family.

One night after the daughters had washed out their clothing they hung their stockings over the fireplace to dry. That night Saint Nicholas, knowing the despair of the father, stopped by the nobleman's house. Looking in the window Saint Nicholas saw that the family had gone to bed. He also noticed the daughters stockings. Inspiration struck Saint Nicholas and he took three small bags of gold from his pouch and threw them one by one down the chimney and they landed in the stockings.

The next morning when the daughters awoke they found their stockings contained enough gold for them to get married. The nobleman was able to see his three daughters marry and he lived a long and happy life.

Children still hang up Christmas stockings although it's getting harder to do this in modern houses which don't have chimneys. It's interesting to see that in various countries children adopt similar customs, even though they don't include stockings. In France, for example, children place their shoes by the fireplace, a tradition dating back to when children wore wooden peasant shoes. In Holland the children fill their shoes with hay and a carrot for the horse of Sinterklass. In Hungary children shine their shoes before putting them near the door or a window sill. Italian children leave their shoes out the night before Epiphany, January 5, for La Befana the good witch. And in Puerto Rico children put greens and flowers in small boxes and place them under their beds for the camels of the Three Kings.

As a boy, I remember hanging up a pillow case on Christmas Eve for the presents that I expected Santa to deliver. Santa. This seemed a much better idea than a sock, which would have been the only substitute in our house, because Mum was not going to give up one of her expensive stockings. Anyway, a pillow case seemed better as it was much bigger and had more room for lots more toys.

## Christmas Wreath

Many people buy, or make a wreath for display on the front door of their home during the weeks of Advent and the Christmas season.

The Christmas wreath is a continuation of the Advent Wreath (German custom in Lutheran churches) which has 4 candles, representing the 4 weeks of Advent. One candle is lit each week. But due to the danger of fire, they were usually placed lying flat on tables, or hung safely parallel to the floor. This made Christmas wreaths much more welcome because they contained no real candles and could be hung anywhere (mostly on doors or in windows). Some people choose to leave their wreaths up all winter. When they do take it down, it is a sign of winter's end and the anticipation of Spring.

The traditional wreath is made of evergreen branches to symbolise everlasting life. These were intertwined with red ribbons to express the festive spirit.

In pagan days, evergreen boughs were believed to protect a home from evil spirits, which were thought to be plentiful during this dark time of the year. During the Middle Ages the red berries of holly were believed to keep witches out of the home; this is why holly became the traditional and lucky evergreen for the wreath-making.

## Father Christmas

Father Christmas is the name used in many English-speaking countries for a symbolic figure associated with Christmas.

Originally, Father Christmas was a figure of English folklore. He was not a gift giver – simply a figure that represented the "spirit of Christmas" especially in the form of generosity, gaiety, abundance and appreciation.

Like Santa, he was fat and often seen wearing a red robe with fur trim and a crown of holly, ivy or mistletoe. In the book, "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens, the character of "The Ghost of Christmas Present" strongly resembles Father Christmas.

Other images of Father Christmas make him a older, wise-looking man, dressed in more of a Father Time fashion, although he doesn't carry a scythe. Some images today give him a sack that creates the false impression he is Santa Claus. If he carries anything, it's more like a cane.

Santa's derivation, on the other hand, is from Saint Nicholas or the Dutch Sinterklaas. It was he who gave gifts to the poor.

Over time, these two figures have merged to create the character now known throughout the world as Santa Claus. Father Christmas was simply overwhelmed by the commercialised Santa.

## Gift Wrap

Although Christmas cards were common in the mid-nineteenth century, it wasn't until many years later that dressing up presents in decorated paper caught on.

Gifts were originally wrapped in simple tissue paper or more sturdy brown paper. In the nineteenth century, gifts were sometimes presented in decorated paper baskets. The technology did not exist to mass produce a decorated, foldable, paper until the 1890's, when developments in printing presses allowed coloured ink to be printed fluidly on stiffer papers. A rotary system was then developed that allowed the printed-paper to be rolled onto cardboard rolls or cut into smaller sheets.

The printed gift wrap industry took off at the turn of the 20th Century. Hy-Sill Manufacturing Inc., founded by Eli Hyman and Morris Silverman, became the first American gift wrap company in 1903. Wrapping paper's biggest name, Hallmark, stumbled upon the gift-wrap market by accident. In 1917, the Hall Brothers offering of green, red, and white tissue paper had sold out in their Kansas City, Missouri store a few days before Christmas. The resourceful owner, Rollie Hall, had sheets of decorative envelope liners shipped over from a manufacturing plant. He placed these large patterned sheets on top of a showcase and sold them for 10 cents each. The decorative paper quickly sold out. The next year, the sheets sold for three for 25 cents, and again they quickly disappeared. The brothers began printing their own Christmas wrapping paper, and soon gift wrap sales rivalled their greeting card income.

Early gift wrappers had to be especially dexterous as adhesive tape wasn't invented until 1930! It wasn't until 1932 that the rolls of adhesive tape were sold in dispensers with cutting blades. Before then, people had to tie their packages with string and sealing wax. In the 20's and 30's small sticky circles were sold in packets along with folded papers that allowed the wrapper to attach the paper. During this time, small gift tags and a type of sticky decorative ribbon were developed and often included in packets of matching wrapping paper.

Over the years, the look of wrapping paper has changed significantly. The first wrapping paper was decorated in the ornate style of the Victorian era, similar to the Christmas greeting cards that had become all the rage. Gilded flourishes of cherubs, birds and flowers were draped across sheets of popular wrapping papers. In the 1930's and 1940's, patterns became more stylised due to the popularity of Art Deco. Decorations moved away from nature to the symbols that we commonly associate with Christmas today. Popular patterns included ice skaters, snowflakes, Christmas trees, and candles. While the symbols remained the same, the artwork became more realistic again in the 50's and 60's. By the 70's and 80's, Madison Avenue had realized the potential of wrapping paper and it often had designs incorporating popular movie or cartoon characters.

Innovations with gift wrap have continued. The 1980's introduced decorative plastic and paper gift bags, though these "new" bags weren't as new as some people thought. The English had often given their gifts in decorated bags during the late 1800's. The introduction of stick-on bows and cascade ribbons in the 80's and 90's further helped less than perfect gift wrappers.

Nowadays one can wrap a gift without even using paper, by going on-line and sending an e-card wrapped in "virtual paper."

## Gingerbread

Making gingerbread cookies and gingerbread houses is a popular activity during the Christmas season. It is called gingerbread because of the "ginger" spice that is used in making the cookies. Gingerbread houses were first made in Germany and became popular after the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel became well-known.



Gingerbread cookies have long been used in some countries to decorate the Christmas tree.

## Mince Pies

I remember making a discovery as a boy that 'mincemeat' is not the same thing as 'minced meat'. While minced meat is the primary ingredient of a hamburger, mincemeat comes from an English word that relates to a spicy preserve comprising a mixture of dried fruit, apple, suet and candied fruit and spices steeped in rum or brandy.

In medieval days, the dishes served at Christmas time usually included lots of meat that helped the people to cope with the cold. Pigs, calves and poultry were the usual choice of meats. For preservation, they were smoked, pickled in stoneware jars or buried in snow in the form of filets, cutlets, hams, pigs' knuckles and trotters. Along with cheeses, they were prepared well in advance of Christmas festivities and winter holidays. In the Middle Ages, Mince Pie was quite popular during the Christmas season. It is perhaps the oldest traditional Christmas dish.

The origins of the fruit mince pies that we enjoy therefore lie in the medieval chewet (also spelled chewette), which was a fried or baked pastry containing chopped liver and other meats mixed with boiled eggs and ginger. Dried fruit and other sweet ingredients such as sugar, apples and candied orange and lemon peel were added to the chewet's filling for variety.

By the 16th century, in England, mince or "shred" pie was considered a Christmas speciality. In the mid-17th century the liver and chopped meat were replaced by suet, and by the 19th century meat was no longer generally used at all.

### Mince Pie Recipe

Mince pies have now become international and recipes have become adapted to suit local ingredients. Here's an Australian version from celebrity chef, Benjamin Christie that uses native Australian fruits and ingredients.

#### *Ingredients*

Marinated Fruit Mix - makes approx 1kg

150g (¾ cup) riberry confit

150g (¾ cup) quandong confit

150g (¾ cup) wild rosella confit

150g (¾ cup) wild lime confit

3 Granny Smith apples

100g (½ cup) brown sugar

7g (1½ teaspoons) Australian Fruit Spice

60ml (2 fl oz.) Bundaberg Rum

Mince Pies pastry - makes approx 24

300g (1½ cups) plain flour 1

50g (5 oz.) unsalted butter

2 teaspoons macadamia nut oil

1 teaspoon lemon myrtle

40g (1½ oz.) sugar

2 fresh large eggs

20ml (½ fl oz.) water

#### *Cooking instruction*

For the marinated fruit mix, finely chop the quandong, rosella and wild lime and combine with ribberries in a bowl. Then grate the Granny Smith apples into the mix. Add brown sugar, fruit spice and rum. Mix well then allow to sit overnight, mixing the mix from time to time. The fruit can be prepared and matured well a head of time.

For the pastry, preheat oven to 200°C. Sift the flour into a bowl, then rub in the butter, macadamia nut oil, sugar and lemon myrtle until crumbly. Add 1 beaten egg and water to bind the dough. This could be done in a food processor. Then turn out to a floured table and knead till the dough is smooth. Cover and place in fridge for at least 1 hour. The dough can be made ahead of time and stored in fridge till required. Then roll out the dough to approx 3mm thick and then cut out 6cm pastry rounds (or what ever size the patty pans are).

Place each pastry round into the patty pan, then spoon in a little of the fruit mix. With the remaining pastry roll out star shaped tops for the pies and place on top. You can do stars or completely cover them. If you do cover them, you'll need to make a hole at the top. With the remaining egg, lightly beat and brush on top the tops of the pastry. Bake at 200°C for approx 20 minutes, then remove from oven and allow to cool on baking trays. To serve dust with icing sugar.

## Mistletoe

Kissing under the mistletoe has long been a part of Christmas tradition, so how did its association with Christmas evolve?

From the earliest times mistletoe has been one of the most magical, mysterious, and sacred plants of European folklore. It was considered to bestow life and fertility; to be a protector against poison; as well as being an aphrodisiac.

Mistletoe is a type of plant. It is capable of growing on its own, although it is more commonly found growing as a parasitic plant. It grows on the branches, or trunk, of a tree and sends out roots that penetrate into the tree so that it can take up nutrients from the sap of the host tree.

The mistletoe of the sacred oak was especially sacred to the ancient Celtic Druids. On the sixth night after the full moon Druid priests would cut oak mistletoe with a golden sickle. Two white bulls would be sacrificed amid prayers requesting that the recipients of the mistletoe would prosper. Mistletoe was long regarded as both a sexual symbol and the "soul" of the oak. It was gathered at both mid-summer and winter solstices, and the custom of using it to decorate houses at Christmas is a remnant of the Druid and other pre-Christian traditions.

In the Middle Ages, and later, branches of mistletoe were hung from ceilings to ward off evil spirits. In Europe they were placed over house and stable doors to prevent the entrance of witches.

For some odd reason, mistletoe was more likely to be found on trees struck by lightning, especially oak trees. Therefore it was believed that the oak mistletoe could extinguish fire. This was associated with an earlier belief that the mistletoe itself could come to the tree during a flash of lightning.

In parts of England and Wales farmers would give the Christmas bunch of mistletoe to the first cow that calved in the New Year. This was thought to bring good luck to the entire herd.

Kissing under the mistletoe is first found associated with the Roman festival of Saturnalia and later with primitive marriage rites. Mistletoe was believed to have the power of bestowing fertility, and the dung from which the mistletoe was thought to arise by the Romans was also said to have "life-giving" power.

In Scandinavia, mistletoe was considered a plant of peace, under which enemies could declare a truce or warring spouses kiss and make-up.

In some parts of England the Christmas mistletoe is burned on the twelfth night lest all the boys and girls who have kissed under it never marry.

And to observe the correct etiquette, a man should pluck a berry from the bunch of mistletoe whenever he kisses a woman under it. When the last berry is gone, there should be no more kissing!

The European mistletoe (*Viscum Album*) is a green shrub with small, yellow flowers and white, sticky berries which are considered poisonous. It looks like large balls of leaves that hang in the foliage of the host tree.

In America, the mistletoe that is commonly used as a Christmas decoration (*Phoradendron flavescens*) is very different. It grows as a parasite on trees along the eastern coast of the country from New Jersey to Florida.

In Australia, we actually have 85 species of Australian mistletoe, mainly in the Loranthaceae family. Contrary to their much-maligned image, none are weeds and none are introduced. They usually mimic their host tree, and sometimes the mimicry is so close that they are almost impossible to detect. They can usually be distinguished by the thickening of leaf distribution, and the sometimes olive green, or purplish colouring on Eucalyptus trees..

The common name of this plant is derived from the ancient belief that mistletoe was propagated from bird droppings. This belief was related to the then-accepted principle that life could spring spontaneously from dung. It was observed in ancient times that mistletoe would often appear on a branch or twig where birds had left droppings. "Mistel" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "dung," and "tan" is the word for "twig". So, mistletoe means "dung-on-a-twig".

By the sixteenth century, botanists had discovered that the mistletoe plant was spread by seeds which had passed through the digestive tract of birds. One of the earliest written references to this appeared in England, in 1532, in an Herbal published by Turner. Botanists of the time also observed that the sticky berry seeds of the mistletoe tended to cling to the bills of birds. When the birds cleaned their bills by rubbing them against the branches or bark of trees, the seeds were further scattered.

## Myer Melbourne Christmas Windows

For decades, parents have taken their children to see the windows of the Myer Department Store in Melbourne. Over Christmas, the windows are stripped of their fashion displays and replaced with a series of themed Christmas displays. Many will remember, the long queues and open mouthed children (and parents) as they slowly moved along Bourke Street taking in all that was to be seen in the five or six windows on display. The scenes begin in the menswear window by the General Post Office. The last window (nearest the David Jones store) was always a simple portrayal of Mary holding the Christ child.

This Melbourne tradition began in 1956. This was the year of the Melbourne Olympics and also the year that television was introduced to Melbourne. Their designer, the very creative Fred Asmussen, began this special tradition through his vision to provide something magical for the people of Melbourne during the Christmas holidays.

Throughout the years, the Myer Christmas Windows have delighted and thrilled generations of children and adults alike. The many and varied themes have included much loved Fairy Tales, famous Children's' books, and themes from the Ballet and Opera.

The following list of the Christmas windows from 1956 until today comes from the Myer Pty Ltd website.

1956 - Santa & the Olympics

1957 -The Nutcracker

1958 - Aladdin

1959 - Famous Fairy Tales

1960 - I Dreamed of Christmas in Different Lands

1961 - Alice in Wonderland

1962 - Santa's Journey into Space

1963 - Cinderella

1964 - Peter Pan

1965 - Swan Lake

1966 - Arabian Nights

1967 - Chinese Fairy Tales

1969 - Sleeping Beauty

1970 - Snugglepote and Cuddlepie

1971 - Disney on Parade

1972 - Christmas around the World  
1973 - Coppelia  
1974 - The Butterfly Ball  
1975 - The Twelve Days of Christmas  
1976 - Peg Maltby's Fairy Tales  
1977 - The Snow Queen  
1978 - Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs  
1979 - An International Christmas  
1980 - A Woodland Christmas  
1981 - Sinbad the Sailor  
1982 - Gilbert and Sullivan  
1983 - A Bear's Christmas  
1984 - Around the World in Eighty Days  
1985 - Fairy Tales  
1986 - Nursery Rhymes  
1987 - Myer Bear Celebrates Christmas  
1988 - Pinocchio  
1989 - Alice in Wonderland  
1990 - Peter Pan  
1991 - Cinderella  
1992 - Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs  
1993 - The Wizard of Oz  
1994 - Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer  
1995 - May Gibbs : The Gumnut Babies  
1996 - The Retrospective of Previous Years  
1997 - Beatrix Potter  
1998 - The Eleventh Hour  
1999 - Charlie and the Chocolate Factory  
2000 - A Christmas Carol  
2001 - Wind In The Willows  
2002 - 12 Days of Christmas  
2003 – How the Grinch Stole Christmas  
2004 – The Polar Express  
2005 – Santa Kid

2006 – Wombat Divine

2007 – Uno's Garden

2008 – How Santa Really Works

2009 - Olivia, The Pig

## Nutcrackers

Even before Tchaikovsky's famous ballet (The Nutcracker) made the toy popular, they were a common Christmas gift in Europe. Especially among the poor, they were a beautiful and useful gift that could be made from a piece of scrap wood.

After Tchaikovsky's ballet the nutcrackers were usually dressed as soldiers or government officials.

A German proverb says "God gives us the nuts but we have to break them ourselves". Perhaps, nutcrackers remind us that nothing in life should come without hard work.

## Plum Pudding

Plum pudding was the predecessor to Christmas Cake.

Originally people used to eat a sort of porridge on Christmas Eve. It was a dish to line the stomach after a day's fasting, which people used to observe for Christmas Eve, or the 'Vigil' as it was called in medieval days in England. Gradually, they began to put spices, dried fruits, honey etc in the porridge to make it a special dish for Christmas. Much later it was turned into a pudding, because it got to be so stiff with all the fruits and things, that they would tie it in a cloth, and dunk it into a large cauldron of boiling water and boil it for many hours. This turned into Christmas Pudding.

Later, around the 16th century, it became popular to add butter, replace the oatmeal with wheat flour and add eggs to hold it together better. This became boiled plumcake. So boiled plum pudding and boiled fruitcake existed side by side depending on which ingredients each housewife used.

During the Puritan reign in England, plum pudding was outlawed as "sinfully rich."

Traditionally in England, small silver charms were baked in the plum pudding. A silver coin would bring wealth in the coming year; a tiny wishbone, good luck; a silver thimble, thrift; an anchor, safe harbor. By Victorian times, only the silver coin remained. In England these tiny charms can still be bought by families who make their own puddings.

In Australia, our pre-decimal coins, threepences, sixpences and shillings had enough silver content to use safely in Christmas pudding. As a child, I can remember the thrill of finding a coin or two in my piece of pudding. I always looked to see if I would get more than my brother, but my mum was careful to maintain equality and ensured that each person received the same amount in their slice of her pudding. Our modern day coins have less silver and they are no longer safe to use in the traditional way. The use of coins has been replaced with copies of the traditional good luck charms.

Here is a great recipe for traditional plum pudding. It can be made well in advance and gets better with age. It requires a preparation time of 20 minutes and a cooking time of 240 minutes (four hours).

### Ingredients (serves 12)

1 x 375g pkt raisins, coarsely chopped

1 x 300g pkt currants

150g sultanas

1 x 170g pkt raisins (dried cranberries)

250ml (1 cup) rum

Melted butter, to grease

250g butter, at room temperature

200g (1 cup) firmly-packed brown sugar

4 eggs

175g (2 1/2 cups) fresh breadcrumbs

75g (1/2 cup) self-raising flour

75g (1/2 cup) plain flour

1 tsp mixed spice

1 tsp ground cinnamon

Warmed custard, to serve

### **Method**

Combine raisins, currants, sultanas, raisins and rum in a bowl. Set aside for 6 hours to macerate.

Brush a 2L (8-cup) capacity pudding basin with melted butter to grease. Line the base with non-stick baking paper.

Use an electric beater to beat the butter and sugar in a bowl until pale and creamy. Add eggs, 1 at a time, beating well after each addition (mixture may appear curdled). Stir in breadcrumbs, combined flours, mixed spice and cinnamon. Add the raisin mixture and stir until combined. Spoon into basin.

Place an upturned heatproof saucer in the base of a saucepan. Fill one-third of the saucepan with boiling water and bring to a simmer over low heat.

Cut a 30cm-square piece of non-stick baking paper and a 30cm-square piece of foil. Place paper on foil and fold to make a pleat in the centre. Place over basin, foil-side up. Tie a double piece of kitchen string around basin to secure. To make a handle, tie a double piece of string loosely over the top of the basin.

Lower the basin onto the saucer in saucepan. Add enough boiling water to reach two-thirds of the way up the basin. Simmer, covered, over low heat, adding boiling water when necessary, for 4 hours or until a skewer inserted in the centre of the pudding comes out clean.

Remove basin from pan. Set aside for 5 minutes. Pour over custard to serve.

### **Notes**

Prep: 20 mins (+ 6 hours macerating & 5 mins standing time)

You can make this recipe up to 2 months ahead. Cover the pudding in the basin with plastic wrap and foil. Store in fridge.

To reheat a pudding: Remove the plastic wrap and foil from the pudding. Repeat step 5. Place an upturned heatproof saucer in the base of a large saucepan. Fill one-third of the saucepan with water and bring to a simmer over low heat. Lower the pudding basin into the saucepan. Simmer, covered, over medium-low heat for 1 hour or until the pudding is heated through. Remove basin from the pan and serve.

## **Poinsettia**

This plant is native to Central America and has been a symbol of Christmas in America beginning in the 1820's. Since then its popularity has spread to other parts of the world.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They grow outdoors year round in warmer areas of Central America. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He brought the plants to America in 1828.

In the eighteenth century, Mexicans perceived that these plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the Poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow, but surrounding the flower are large, bright red leaves, that are often mistaken for petals.

According to tradition, there is a charming little story of Pepita, a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at one Christmas Eve Service. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was

filled with sadness rather than joy. "I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said Pedro consolingly.

Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet. Looking at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel.

As she approached the altar, she remembered Pedro's kind words: "Even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." She felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes.

From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the Flores de Noche Buena, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season.

## Reindeer

The association of reindeer with the celebration of Christmas came along with the creation of Santa Claus. Whenever we think of Santa, we think of his sleigh being drawn by the reindeer. Santa is believed to have come from the far away North so what other form of transport could be more appropriate than the traditional reindeer drawn sleigh? Of course, to enable Santa to deliver presents right around the globe, his reindeer need to fly. They are reported to have been seen on air traffic control radar all around the world.

The reindeer is man's most ancient herd animal; the first animals being raised around 15,000 years ago. Up until about 12,000 years ago, reindeer grazed over a vast area of Europe. Primitive rock paintings suggest that they exist in large number and there is archaeological evidence of tools made from reindeer horn. There was even a period of European prehistory in a part of France called Dordogne that is sometimes called "the civilisation of reindeer."

The popular idea of Santa and his reindeer pulling a sleigh laden with gifts came from Clement Moore's poem "The Night Before Christmas". In the poem, Santa names all the reindeer - Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. Curiously, the name Donner means thunder in Dutch and the name of this reindeer eventually became Donner. Blitzen means lightning in German.

It wasn't until 1939 that "Rudolf" was added to the list when a man named Robert L May, an advertising executive for the Montgomery Ward department store, wrote a poem for a marketing campaign. His story about Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer with a big ugly red nose was based on the old ugly duckling children's fairy tale by the Grimm Brothers. The book was illustrated by Denver Gillen and sold over 2.4 million copies in its first year. The song, "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" was written and recorded by Gene Autry, the cowboy crooner, in 1949.

## Santa Claus

Santa Claus is the mythical jovial figure who leaves presents for the children on Christmas Eve and who enjoys a beer, a biscuit or some other refreshment as he calls at your home. He has had a good number of beers at our house.

The original Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious and devoted his life to Christianity. He became widely known for his generosity to the poor. The Romans held him in contempt and he was imprisoned and tortured.

But when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he allowed Nicholas to go free. Constantine became a Christian and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Nicholas was a delegate to the council. He is especially noted for his love of children and for his generosity. He is the patron saint of sailors, Sicily, Greece, and Russia. He is also, of course, the patron saint of children. The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive. In 16th century Holland, Dutch children would place their wooden shoes by the hearth in the hope that they would be filled with a treat.

The Dutch spelled St. Nicholas as Sint Nikolaas, which became corrupted to Sinterklaas, and finally, in English, to Santa Claus.

The Santa Claus with whom we identify originally came out of a 19th Century poem written by Rev. Clement Moore, who wrote, "A Visit From St Nicolas" in 1882.

T'was the night before Christmas, when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,  
In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there.  
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,  
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.  
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,  
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap.  
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window I flew like a flash,  
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.  
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow  
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below.  
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,  
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer.  
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,  
I knew in a moment it must be St Nick.  
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,  
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name!  
"Now Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen!  
On, Comet! On, Cupid!, on Donner and Blitzen!  
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!  
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!"  
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,  
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky.  
So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,  
With the sleigh full of Toys, and St Nicholas too.  
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof  
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.  
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,  
Down the chimney St Nicholas came with a bound.  
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,  
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.  
A bundle of Toys he had flung on his back,  
And he looked like a peddler, just opening his pack.



His eyes-how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!

His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!

His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,

And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,

And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.

He had a broad face and a little round belly,

That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,

And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself!

A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,

Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,

And filled all the stockings, then turned with a jerk.

And laying his finger aside of his nose,

And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose!

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,

And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.

But I heard him exclaim, 'ere he drove out of sight,

"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night!"

Santa was presented in this poem as a chubby and jovial fellow. His appearance has continued to evolve over time. He first appeared in robes, something akin to what a religious figure such as a priest or bishop would have worn. This became a little more modern when the illustrator Thomas Nast, depicted a rotund Santa for Christmas issues of Harper's magazine between the 1860s and the 1880s. Nast also added details that included Santa's workshop at the North Pole and Santa's list of the good and bad children of the world.

Then, at the beginning of the 1930s, the relatively new Coca-Cola Company was looking for ways to increase sales of their product during winter (a rather slow time of year for the soft drink market). They turned to a talented commercial illustrator named Haddon Sundblom, who created a series of memorable drawings that we now use to envisage our modern, larger than life Santa with his red and white garb.

Contrary to the popular idea that Coca Cola was solely responsible for the creating the appearance of our modern day image of Santa, Sundblom's illustrations were based upon what had already evolved as an image of Santa. Coca Cola's advertisements certainly provided evolution and a boost to result in our current image of the figure with his red and white tunic, broad black belt, boots, wispy beard and spectacles. In an era before the advent of television, before colour motion pictures became common, and before the widespread use of colour in newspapers, Coca-Cola's magazine advertisements, billboards, and point-of-sale store displays were for many Americans their primary exposure to the modern Santa Claus image.

So, we know what Santa looks like, but where does he live?

Over the years, children have wanted to know where Santa Claus actually came from. Where did he live when he wasn't delivering presents? Those questions gave rise to the legend that Santa Claus lived at the North Pole, where his Christmas-gift workshop was also located. This spot was chosen because it was very remote and few people had ever been there to verify, or dismiss, this notion.

By 1925, people had worked out that it would not be possible to graze reindeer on the ice of the North Pole, so newspapers created the idea that Santa Claus in fact lived in Finnish Lapland. "Uncle Markus" (Markus Rautio) who compared the popular "Children's Hour" on Finnish public radio, revealed the great secret for the first time in 1927: Santa Claus lives on Lapland's Korvatunturi - "Ear Fell"

The fell (hilly moorlands) is situated directly on Finland's eastern frontier, and its shape resembles a hare's ears - which are in fact Santa Claus's ears, with which he listens to hear if the world's children are being naughty or nice. Santa has the assistance of a busy group of elves, who have quite their own history in Scandinavian legend.

Over the centuries, customs from different parts of the Northern Hemisphere thus came together and created the whole world's Santa Claus - the ageless, timeless, deathless white-bearded man who gives out gifts on Christmas and always returns to Korvatunturi in Finnish Lapland.

Since the 1950s, Santa has happily sojourned in the town of Napapiiri, near Rovaniemi in Lapland. By 1985 his visits to Napapiiri had become so regular that he established his own Santa Claus Office and headquarters there. He comes there every day of the year to hear what children want for Christmas and to talk with children who have arrived from around the world. Santa Claus Village is also the location of Santa's main Post Office, which receives children's letters from the four corners of the world.

## Snow

We see snow on Christmas cards and as an adornment on Christmas Trees.

My research for these notes provided me with a multitude of symbolic meanings for the association of snow with Christmas. These ranged from obscure ones in which snow is said to be symbolic of purity (i.e. being as pure as snow), to those in which snow provides water for cleansing and refreshment.

The one that I think is most realistic is that snow is simply prevalent in winter in the northern hemisphere and this is where many of our Christmas traditions have come from. There is simply no spiritual connection with snow at Christmas time, other than what individuals might like to create in their own mind.

Snow is simply a romantic association with winter and the festive season in Europe and America.

In Palestine, snowfall was rare except on the high mountains where it was seen year round. Normally, Israelites only saw snow from a distance where it often appeared luminous because of the reflection of the sun's rays upon the snow capped mountains. They might have used snow as a metaphorical comparison with things that they wanted to describe, but nearly no one would have ever got close to it.

As I mentioned when writing about the timing of Christmas, it is extremely unlikely that the shepherds would have come in from snow covered fields to see the Christ Child, nor would a government, no matter how insensitive, have expected people, such as Mary and Joseph, to travel long distances for a census in the misery of a cold snowy winter.

Thank goodness that it is summer in Australia at Christmas time and we can enjoy the outdoors without worrying about keeping warm!

## Snowman

The Christmas snowman is a symbol of the northern hemisphere winter holiday season. A snowman is a figure made out of snow that looks something like a person after it is decorated with objects that make a face, after a hat and, or a scarf, are added. In many countries, making a snowman is a popular Christmas tradition. Most snowmen are male, but snowwomen can be made by adding a flowery hat or scarf.

In Australia, we don't see snow very much, and certainly not at Christmas. The only places that we see snowmen, or snowwomen, are in those few areas where snow falls in our winter, or on Christmas card scenes.

While we will rarely, if ever, make a snowman at Christmas, you may want to follow these recommendations for a good snowman on your next winter trip to an alpine resort:

Firstly, you'll need to dress in some warm clothing as it will take some time to make one.

Secondly, the snow must be hard enough to form into a solid mass. When the snow is too fluffy, you will find it hard to form into the shape of a ball. The traditional snowman has 3 different sized balls piled on top of each other. You will make a large ball for the base, a medium sized ball for the body, and a smaller ball for the head. Another way is to roll one large sized ball for the body and a smaller one for the head. To start making your snowman, you should first

make a snowball. Push some snow into a ball in your hands and then roll it along the ground so more snow sticks to it. Keep rolling it around, collecting more and more snow until it becomes the size that you want.

Secondly, the parts of your snowman should be in proportion, so make sure not to make his head too small. Try not to use snow that gets too close to the ground. Snow that is rolled up next to the ground will have leaves, twigs and grass in it and will change the look of your snowman.

Finally, you can decorate your snowman. Most snowmen have arms that are made from sticks. Be careful about the way you insert sticks into the sides of the snowman or else it will fall apart. The eyes of the snowman can be made with pebbles or small stones. Three more pebbles can be inserted down the front of the snowman to look like buttons. Your snowman will look great if you have some old clothing such as hats, scarves, coats or gloves. The nose of the snowman can be made with a large stone or a stick.

Snowmen have no religious significance whatsoever, but they are a symbol of Christmas because in the northern hemisphere, Christmas occurs when it is winter and there is an abundance of snow. Playing in the snow is a fun family activity.

The 'Frosty the Snowman' was first sung by Gene Autry in 1950. It is about a snowman who came to life when he wore a magical hat that some children found for him. He had a number of playful adventures with the children before he "hurried on his way." Near the end of their adventures together, the children are saddened by Frosty having to hurry on his way for the last time. However, Frosty reassures them by exclaiming, "I'll be back again some day."

## Tinsel

There is a legend associated with this thin metallic foil strip decoration that we use to decorate our Christmas trees. It comes from Germany and tells about parents who trimmed a tree while their children were sleeping. Spiders came to see the tree, leaving cobwebs all over it. The Christ Child came to bless the tree and turned the cobwebs to silver.

Tinsel was invented in Germany around 1610. At that time real silver was used, and machines were invented which pulled the silver out into the wafer thin strips to become tinsel. Silver was durable, but it tarnished quickly as we all know from trying to keep Nana's prized silverware clean.

Attempts were made to use a mixture of lead and tin, but this was heavy and tended to break under its own weight so was not so practical. Silver was used to make tinsel right up to the mid-20th century.

Nowadays, our tinsel is made from tiny pieces of coloured aluminium foil.

## Wassail or Wassailing

From the beginning of the 13th century, wassailing became a traditional beverage and toast during the Christmas season. The original beverage was a mixture of roasted apples, ale, sugar, spices, and sometimes cream or eggs. Perhaps a variation of this later turned into egg-nog.

Wassail also had its own serving bowl that was quite large with a large spoon to pour the beverage into the cups. This later turned into what today is known as punch bowls. And the Wassail beverage later became replaced with the idea of using plain old liquor for a holiday drink and toast. No matter what the beverage of choice is today, be it alcoholic or not, toasting one another and wishing good cheer remains as a tradition.

Wassailing, pure and simple, is a drinking ceremony. We know that students seem to do this every night of the week, but for the purpose of the holiday celebration, wassailing was a way to relax with your family and friends. Some cynics suggest that it is really a way of coping with family and friends!

Its origins can be traced back to Babylon and Rome. In Roman times, Caligula was well known for the extended five day celebration of Saturnalia (to honour the god Saturn) with drunkenness among masters and slaves who would enjoy a brief period of equality. In Babylon, the masters would tend to the needs of the slaves, but they still had their own drunkenness in their duties.

Throughout the Northern European areas, this drunkenness was brought with them from house to house as a community affair. With such drunkenness was also a lot of singing, the origin of carolling. Along with carolling, some would get gifts of buns, cakes or almost anything available to eat.

The purist Christian who celebrates Christmas is more than likely to avoid this tradition altogether or create a virgin punch - one devoid of alcohol. As far as carolling goes, many will not go door to door singing while drunk as in many communities, one could get arrested. Some will go door to door singing just for the fun of it while others sing to collect for charities.

## Yuletide

Yuletide is predominantly a European festival. The word "yule" means "wheel," and provides a symbol representing the sun.

## Yule Log

The origin of the Yule Log again goes back to the winter solstice, when bonfires were lit to scare off winter demons and brighten the darkest day of the year. The Yule Log was originally an entire whole tree trunk, cut on a day called Candlemas (February 2) and dried all year long. The English custom was to light the new log with a piece of last year's log, which was kept in the house all year (with the belief that it protected the house against fire and lightning).

In England the idea of the Yule Log began with the Druids, who prayed that the oak or fruitwood log (burned in the midwinter festival) would flame, like the sun forever. The log and its ashes were considered good luck. In some homes today, wine is thrown on the log first by the youngest child before it is lit. It was considered back luck if the log went out before New Years' Day.

In Southern France, people put the log on the fire for the first time on Christmas Eve and then continue to burn it a little piece each day until "the twelfth night" (January 5). If it is kept under the bed, it will protect the house from fire and thunder and will prevent those who live in the house from getting chilblains on their heels in winter. The unburned remains are also believed to cure cattle diseases and to help cows deliver calves. If you scatter the ashes over the fields it will save the wheat from mildew.

Its disappearance coincides with that of great hearths that were gradually replaced by cast-iron stoves. The great log was thus replaced by a smaller one, often embellished with candles and greenery, which is now placed in the centre of the table as a Christmas decoration.

## EASTER – THE SECOND PART OF THE STORY

Although based on many original pagan festivals and celebrations, Christmas is clearly a Christian Festival. It originates from the words "Christ Mass" or Mass of Christ. For most people, it is one of the joyous and happiest times of the year. With all the attention on the arrival of the baby Jesus, family, gifts, carols, shopping and Christmas tradition, it would be easy to believe that Christmas is the most important event in the annual Christian church calendar. In fact it is not!

For Christians, Easter is far more significant than Christmas. It is at Easter that Christians celebrate an event that changed the world – the resurrection of Jesus and the saving of the world from sin.

The complete story of the life of Jesus Christ took place over approximately 33 years of his total life.

Once he grew up, Jesus began travelling through the general area that we now call Israel. He could see the suffering of the people of Palestine under the oppressive rule of the local governors of the time and the Roman rulers. Jesus wandered the countryside, preaching religious reform and the love of God for His people. He was concerned with the welfare of the poor and the oppressed and spoke against the hypocrisy of the privileged and the rich.

The Pharisees (traditional Jewish scholars) strongly opposed his teachings, and resented his growing influence. But Jesus was welcomed and loved by the common people who looked upon him as the long-awaited Messiah or Saviour. As the number of his followers and his influence with the people grew, the Jewish and Roman authorities began to suspect Jesus of being a revolutionary and a troublemaker.

Jesus faithfully observed the religious customs and festivals of his community, including the festival of Passover, which marked the end of slavery in Egypt for the Jews. So it happened that around the age of thirty two or thirty three, Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

As he entered Jerusalem, the people welcomed him with songs of praise. They covered his path with flowers, and waved green palm fronds in the air, and formed a great procession to lead him into Jerusalem. The Pharisees were afraid and angry when they saw the welcome he received from the people of Jerusalem. Jesus went to the Temple in Jerusalem, where he drove out the moneylenders. This annoyed the priests further. They decided that the time had come to rid themselves of this carpenter's son from Nazareth, who wielded such tremendous influence over the hearts of the people. The Pharisees, the priests and the Romans plotted to arrest and execute Jesus.

A few days later, Jesus celebrated the Feast of the Passover with his twelve disciples. While they were eating, the disciples began to argue among themselves as to who was better than the others. Jesus listened in silence, and then taking a basin of water, began washing the feet of his disciples. Peter, one of the disciples protested. But Jesus explained why he did what he did - to tell them that no one was better than the other, that if he, whom they called Lord and Master, could wash their feet, then they too could wash each other's feet.

Jesus then told his disciples, that before the night was out, one of them would betray him, and give him up to those who would kill him. The disciples were horrified, and asked Jesus to tell them who it was who would turn traitor. But Jesus only said that it was one of the twelve who ate with him that night.

The disciple John, who was sitting next to Jesus, whispered so that no one else could hear, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus whispered back so only John could hear, 'It is the one to whom I shall give a piece of bread after I have dipped it in the dish.' Then Jesus reached across the table and gave the bread to his disciple Judas Iscariot.

Judas left the table at once, and as he went, Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you have to do.'

Before the meal was over that night, Jesus took some of the unleavened bread of the feast and broke it into pieces. He gave a piece each to the eleven remaining disciples, saying 'Take and eat this, for this is my body which is given for you.' He then passed a cup of wine to them and said, 'Drink, for this is my blood which is shed for you.' Then Jesus commanded, 'Do this as often as you would remember me.' This is the origin of the Christian celebration of 'The Lords Supper' or Eucharist. Many Christians simply refer to this as 'Communion'.

Jesus spent the rest of the night praying in a grove of olive trees, called the garden of Gethsemane. He knew that when morning came, Judas Iscariot would betray him.

Judas had hurried to the High Priest of the Temple as soon as he left Jesus and the other disciples. Judas had agreed to betray Jesus for the sum of thirty pieces of silver. When it was almost dawn, he led the High Priest and the

Pharisees and the Roman soldiers to the grove where Jesus waited with his remaining disciples. So that the Roman soldiers would arrest the right person, Judas ran up to Jesus and embraced him.

Jesus was taken to the home of the High Priest where the priests demanded that he be killed. But the land was ruled by the Romans, and no one could be executed without their sanction. So Jesus was led to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate questioned Jesus, and then declared he could not sentence him for he saw no evil in him. But the priests and the Pharisees insisted that Jesus was a troublemaker, and should be put to death. So Pilate sent Jesus to King Herod, who ruled Galilee from where Jesus came. But Herod too could find no evil in Jesus, and sent him back to Pilate.

Once again Pilate said to the enemies of Jesus that he saw no reason to execute him, and that he should be set free. But Jesus' enemies demanded that he be crucified. At length, Pilate gave in to their demands, and ruled that Jesus be put to death on the cross.

Jesus was crucified as a political rebel the very same day on a hill called Golgotha. When at length he died, his friends asked Pilate if they might take down his body, to give it proper burial. Pilate agreed. So Jesus' followers took him down from the cross, and wrapped him in a shroud, and buried him in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea near Golgotha.

Jesus was a real person, of that there is no doubt. But very little is known of his life, apart from what his followers told and wrote. Some people therefore find it difficult to separate facts from belief while hearing the story of Jesus.

Jesus' story, according to the Christians, clearly does not end with his death and burial. Three days after his death, some women went to Jesus' tomb with fragrant herbs to place in the linen wrappings around his body. But they found that the tomb lay open, and two Angels sat where the body of Jesus had been lying. The Angels told the women not to be afraid, for said they, Jesus had risen from the dead.

Christians the world over believe in Jesus' Resurrection, and celebrate Easter to mark this wonderful event. Belief in the Resurrection is the core of the Christian faith. Easter is obviously the most important event in the calendar of the Christian Church.

The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is wonderful itself. It is what this means that is the thing that is especially important to Christians. Jesus made it clear that he was the Son of God. Therefore the person who was born at Christmas and who eventually died on the Cross was God himself. The fact that he was crucified, died and rose again from death is undisputed. There were many witnesses and his death is recorded in historical records, not just the Bible.

What does this mean for us? It means that there is hope! Life doesn't just end at death.

Christmas is a great time, but it is just the beginning of this fantastic Christian story.

If you would like to learn more about the authenticity of this story, try reading a great little book titled 'Religion is for Fools' and written by Bill Medley. It was first published by Monarch Books in 2004. (ISBN 978-1-85424-681-3)