

# Christmas

By Jacqueline Simpson

For the first three centuries of Christianity, there was no liturgical feast specifically celebrating the physical birth of Jesus Christ. On 6 January, however, the Eastern Church centred on Constantinople celebrated the Epiphany (i.e. 'manifestation' or 'revelation') of Christ's divine nature by the supernatural events at his baptism, and at some point they added a commemoration of his birth to the liturgy of this day. The earliest record of a feast of the Nativity on 25 December comes from a Roman church calendar of 354 A.D., and gradually spread through both Western and Eastern churches (except the Armenians, who still observe the Nativity on 6 January).

The choice of date had non-Christian precedent. In the calendar of the later Roman Empire 25 December was reckoned to be the date of the midwinter solstice, after which the hours of daylight gradually lengthened. In 270s it was made an official religious festival, *dies natalis Soli Invicti*, 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun', for at this period the sun god was recognised as the chief deity in the State religion. For Christians, light and sun were natural symbols for Christ – indeed, they could be justified from scriptural passages, including the first chapter of John's Gospel, the last chapter of Revelation, and Christ's own words 'I am the Light of the World' – so it must have seemed both convenient and appropriate to choose the same date as the Feast of the Nativity. The Feast of the Epiphany continued to be observed on 6 January, as it still is, though in the Western Church its emphasis has changed from the baptism of Jesus to the visit of the magi. It marks the completion of the Twelve Days of Christmas, a holiday period defined in 567 by the Council of Tours.

Liturgically, Christmas is the second greatest feast of the sacred year. Like Easter, it is preceded by a period of penance and fasting (Advent), though this is shorter than Lent. Christmas Day enjoys the unique privilege, inaugurated in Rome in the fifth century, of having three distinct Masses: at midnight, at dawn, and in full daylight. Of these, the Midnight Mass is the most popular in all Catholic countries, and similar services have been adopted by many Anglican churches and by the Lutherans of Scandinavia. Secondary religious customs include the decoration of churches and the singing of carols. The latter had been very popular in the Middle Ages and was revived in the nineteenth century after a long lapse; in the Anglican Church it is often formalised into the special service of Nine Lessons and Carols. The Christmas Crib is also widespread, representing the scene in the Bethlehem stable with statues of Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus, angels, shepherds and beasts. It is often said that it was St Francis of Assisi who invented this aid to devotion in 1224, but in fact he only popularised an older custom. The cribs of German and Italian churches are particularly large and elaborate.

Alongside religious observances, Christmas is marked by secular customs which can be paralleled in many societies. In the European climate, nature provides good practical reasons that favour midwinter festivals. At this season there are no urgent agricultural tasks, the nights are long, and food is relatively plentiful – especially meat from the surplus livestock which were slaughtered in preparation for the winter, and autumn fruits such as apples and nuts. The season has symbolic importance too. Even communities which did not have enough astronomical knowledge to pinpoint the exact

date of the winter solstice accurately would have been aware that in the latter part of December there were a few days when the hours of daylight were particularly short, after which the days grew gradually longer, suggesting that the sun was renewing its strength. There is reason to think that some pre-Christian Celtic and Germanic peoples held midwinter feasts lasting several days, though the details are unknown.

Roman customs, however, are fully documented. For Romans, much of December and the beginning of January was one long festive season. First came the Saturnalia, a period of five or six days of revelry beginning on 17 December and honouring Saturn, god of new-sown crops and here envisaged as the ruler of a joyful Golden Age. Shops were closed, business ceased, work was forbidden (except cooking and baking), people gave one another presents, and there were great banquets. Often, social distinctions were turned topsy-turvy: slaves sat at table and gorged, while their masters waited on them. The solstice itself, 25 December, was a day for religious observances, not merrymaking, but it was soon followed by the wild three-day celebration of the Kalends, the Roman New Year, beginning on 1 January. All Romans, rich or poor, ate and drank the best they could afford. Adults gave one another presents yet again. Houses were decked inside and out with evergreens, torches and lamps. Revellers roamed the streets disguised in masks and costumes of animal skins.

Christian preachers condemned some aspects of the Roman festival – the drunkenness and excessive gluttony, and especially the masquerading, which they saw as sexually indecent and socially degrading – but other secular customs could be happily combined with religious observances to create the medieval Christmas from which our own has evolved. One that was widespread in the Middle Ages and has persisted to the present day is to decorate houses and churches with sprays of evergreens such as ivy, bay, holly and mistletoe; ribbons, tinsel, baubles, paper-chains and candles are often added. Holly wreaths may be hung on the front door, or from the ceiling; some people lay them on family graves. Formerly, in Britain, France, Germany and the Slav countries a huge Yule Log was the centre of the festivities; it would be ceremonially brought in and kindled on Christmas Eve, and kept burning throughout the Twelve Days. Its charred remnants might be kept all year to protect the house from harm, and then used to help kindle the following year's log.

The Christmas Tree began as a German custom. It is first mentioned in Strasburg in 1605, where families set up a fir-tree in the parlour and decked it with paper rosettes, apples, sweets, and gold foil; later, some put out a small tree for each child, with presents laid at its foot. It was more popular among Protestants than Catholics (the latter preferred the Crib), and particularly among the upper class. It is said that Princess Helène of Mecklenburg introduced it to Parisian society in 1840, and Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to England the following year. Modern developments include Christmas trees in churches, and large ones in open-air public places.

Increasingly, the modern Christmas is centred on the exchange of gifts and cards, and on children. Supernatural midwinter gift-bringers have figured in European folklore for centuries, and can take many forms – saints and angels, or goblins and mock-monsters – and they appear on various dates from November through to Twelfth Night. St Nicholas, patron saint of children, brings gifts either on the eve of his own feast day (6 December) or on Christmas Eve, in Holland and Belgium, and in the Catholic parts of Germany, Switzerland and Austria. He arrives on horseback, dressed as a bishop in red

and gold robes. Children put out hay for his horse, and a glass of schnaps for his servant Scruffy Johnny, or Black Peter. Often he is accompanied by Krampus or Klaubauf, a shaggy monster with horns, black face, and fiery eyes, who carries a stick to beat naughty children. In the Protestant parts of Germany it is the Christ Child who comes at midnight on Christmas Eve to bless good children and leave presents for them. He may be accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht, a weird figure dressed in skins or straw who gives good children apples and gingerbread but smears naughty ones with soot.

The Anglo-American Father Christmas / Santa Claus is a composite figure who has passed through many stages. In England there are late medieval references to a Sir Christmas, Captain Christmas, or Father Christmas who personified feasting and merriment. Ben Jonson's *Christmas his Masque* (1616) links this figure to others representing fine food, carols, wassailing, mumming, and New Year gifts, in protest against Puritan disapproval. Charles Dickens gave a splendid description of a personified Christmas Spirit in his *A Christmas Carol* (1843) – a 'jolly Giant, glorious to see', in a room thickly hung with holly, ivy and mistletoe, and piled high with food. He wears a green robe trimmed with white fur; he has long curly brown hair, and is wearing a wreath of holly set with icicles. Though the Spirit in Dickens is not a gift-bringer, other Victorians, especially artists, represented Father Christmas as an old man, bearded, trudging through the snow with his sack of presents, dressed in a long hooded robe which was often, but by no means always, red.

In America, Dutch settlers had kept the European tradition that St Nicholas would come in the night of December 5/6 to leave presents in the shoes or stockings of sleeping children. In 1809 Washington Irving drew attention to this, but transferred the idea to Christmas Eve. In 1822 Clement Clark Moore wrote a poem entitled 'A Visit from St Nicholas' ('Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house ...') which became hugely influential. His Nicholas is a fat little pipe-smoking gnome, dressed all in fur, hurtling through the sky in a miniature sleigh drawn by eight tiny reindeer and entering houses via the chimney. The name was soon shortened to 'Santa Claus', which reached England in 1854 through a fictional story by Susan and Ann Warner, 'The Christmas Stocking'. In the 1860s the artist Thomas Nash illustrated Moore's poem, dressing Nicholas not in furs but in the typical Dutch costume of a belted jacket, blue breeches, and a flat sailor's cap. By the end of the nineteenth century the clothes were almost always red with white trimmings, and the cap was long and floppy. Later, a home at the North Pole and a team of helpful elves were added. The Coca-Cola advertisements of the 1920s gave worldwide publicity to this image.