

The Feast of St Nicholas

December 6



The story of Santa Claus begins with a boy named Nicholas, who was born during the third century in the village of Patara which is now on the southern coast of Turkey. He was born into a very rich family and was brought up to be a Christian. His parents died when he was very young and so he became a very rich young man. Nicholas decided that he would use his money as Jesus would want him to and so he helped those who were poor, sick or in need of comfort. He also decided that he wanted to spend his life serving God and even though he was still very young he became Bishop of Myra. Soon he was known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.

At that time it was very dangerous to be a Christian and Nicholas was sent to prison by the Emperor Diocletian. He spent a long time there. We know that he was released before the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 because he attended this meeting. He is said to have died on December 6, in the year 343 and to be buried in the Cathedral in Myra. Shortly after his death and a strange liquid substance which was called manna was found in his grave. This liquid was said to have healing powers and so Nicholas' fame spread. The anniversary of his death became his feast day and was a day of great celebration.

There are lots of stories and about Nicholas and his generosity to those in need. One of the most famous ones tells of a poor man who had three daughters. In those days every young woman who wanted to be married had to have a dowry, something valuable that her father would give to her husband to be. If you had a big dowry then there was a

much better chance of finding a good husband. Without a dowry it was very hard for a woman to get married and many women without dowries were sold as slaves. The poor man did not want this to happen but he could not think of anything else to do. But Nicholas heard what was happening and every night for three nights he threw a bag of gold in through an open window in the poor man's house. The story tells us that the bags of gold landed in stockings or shoes left in front of the fire to dry. This is where we get the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes for gifts from Saint Nicholas. Sometimes the story says that he threw gold balls instead of bags of gold. That is why three gold balls, sometimes represented as oranges, are one of the symbols for St. Nicholas. Whatever the story we know that St. Nicholas is a gift-giver!

St. Nicholas' feast day, December 6th was celebrated all over Europe and this kept the stories of his generosity alive. In Germany and Poland, boys dressed up as bishops and begged for the poor—and sometimes for themselves! In the Netherlands and Belgium, St. Nicholas was said to arrive on a ship from Spain and to ride a white horse as he traveled around the country giving gifts.

In many European countries December 6th is still the main day for giving gifts. In Holland St. Nicholas' Day is celebrated with the sharing of sweets and small gifts which are thrown in through the door. Dutch children leave carrots and hay in their shoes for the horse, hoping St. Nicholas will exchange them for small gifts. This simple gift-giving in early Advent helps keep the Christmas Day focus on the Christ Child.

It is believed that European people who emigrated to America brought the tradition of St Nicholas or Sinterklaas with them and that over the centuries he became known as our beloved Santa Claus.

Find out lots more about St Nicholas on the following website

www.stnicholascentre.org

