

## THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

In the closing of Dickens' A Christmas Carol it reads, "Scrooge was better than his word . . . and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us Every One!"

Then in a far less somber setting I captured these words from a familiar friend of our youth: "Christmas must be coming," Pooh said to Piglet. "I can already feel the Merry." One reason classical literature abounds at this time of the year is because classics deal with common longings and truths that we all hold dear. And there is none dearer than the spirit of Christmas. What is the spirit of Christmas? We can best answer that by first asking ourselves . . .

### 1. What is Christmas?

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior. Matthew 1:21-23 says, *"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."* As Christians, we celebrate the birth of the Son of God, when God became flesh and dwelt among us. *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). It is precious to us because He came to all people everywhere. John 3:16 reminds us of this: *"For God so loved the world . . ."* John prophesied that the church will be made up of people from all points of the globe. *" . . . for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation"* (Revelation 5:9).

At Christ's birth the Shepherds came, later the Wise Men came and at the Temple Simeon and Anna recognized Him. Different groups of people, from different parts of the world welcomed the little King of Kings! We see when Jesus was only twelve he astounded and confounded the teachers of the law. In His ministry he came to women of ill repute, maniacs and tax collectors. Some of the highest-ranking religious rulers came to Him such as Nicodemus. Even the enemies of our Lord said, *" . . . behold, the world is gone after him"* (John 12:19). Christmas is a reminder that Christ is the gift to the entire world. *"Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift"* (II Corinthians 9:15). Christ was born to die for our sins. He rose again and is willing to give eternal life to whosoever believes by repenting and putting their whole life in His hands by faith.

## 2. Why Gifts at Christmas?

Like a tree with one trunk and multiple branches, the custom of gift giving has more than one reason. The record of gifts at Christmas comes to us from the Wise Men or Magi, *“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh”* (Matthew 2:11). Scholarship tells us on December 25 of 2 BC (Christ was a toddler at this time) as it entered retrograde, Jupiter (known as “the King Planet”) reached full stop in its travel through the fixed stars. Magi viewing from Jerusalem would have seen it stopped in the sky above the little town of Bethlehem. So after the Wise Men left Jerusalem, God continued to guide them to the exact spot to find Jesus and it is no coincidence that gifts were brought to Jesus on our date of December 25. So the first Christmas gift giving did take place on December 25.

The second branch on our Christmas tree comes to us from an actual person named Nicholas, who was born during the third century in the village of Patara, when this area of the world was under Greek dominion. He was reared in an affluent family and while very young, his wealthy parents died leaving a substantial fortune to him. Nicholas committed his life to serving Christ and took very seriously the words of Jesus when He said, *“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in”* (Matthew 25:35). *“And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”* (Matthew 25:35,40). Shortly after entering the ministry Nicholas became the Bishop of Myra located in modern day Turkey. As Nicholas beheld the poor and abused of his community, he desired to secretly become a blessing. So he stealthily set out at night away from observing eyes and threw small sacks of money into people’s windows, chimneys or shoes which had been placed outside the houses. Because of the vast sum of money left to him in his inheritance, he was able to keep this custom up for a good while. One of my favorite stories of this kind man tells of a poor village man who had three virgin daughters and in that time and area of the world a man was required to pay a dowry in giving his daughter away in marriage. If a man were not able to make dowry, his daughters would not marry or, even worse, become prostitutes to make money for the family. As each girl came of age to be married, Nicholas anonymously threw a sack of gold into the house to cover the girls’ dowries. One night, one of the girls had washed out her stockings and hung them above the smoldering embers of the fireplace to dry while she slept and when Nicholas threw the sack of gold into the chimney, the dowry money for the girl landed in her stocking. Thus, the custom of hanging stockings at Christmas was born.

By the time the reformation began to take place, Nicholas, like many departed saints (which all believers are) who had lived a good Christian life, began to be venerated beyond God’s design. Thus, to restore the true desire of Nicholas to remain unknown in his giving so that Christ might receive the glory, Martin Luther of Germany began to refer to this ancient

giver of gifts as “Christkindl” meaning “The Christ Child.” Therefore in the original intent of Nicholas, to give God the glory as the giver (James 1:17), Luther encouraged everyone to give in the spirit of the Christ-child. And this is where we get our modern “Santa Claus,” a derivative of the Dutch name “Sinterklaas” meaning Saint Nicholas.

Let us embrace the spirit of giving like the Wise Men as an act of worship to Christ and let us be practical in our giving to be a blessing to those we love in the spirit of Christ.

### **3. Where did we get the name “Christmas”?**

I’ll be honest with you, because the name embraces the Eucharistic word “mass” from the formal church, I have been hesitant about studying the etymology of this word. However, my studies brought a rather happy surprise to my understanding. The Latin word “missa” literally means dismissal. The concluding words of the church service in Latin are, “Ite, missa est”: “Go, (the prayer) has been sent,” or “Go, it is the dismissal.” My studies revealed, in Christian usage, the term gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word “dismissal” has come to imply a “mission.” These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church.

As I see Christmas, I see it as “The Christ Mission.” I love what I read as I entered a church building many years ago; a sign above the doors read, “Enter to worship” and as I left the auditorium, I saw the words, “leave to serve.” So let us take the opportunity in this season by living up to the name “Christmas” and become part of “The Christ Mission” to bring our Savior to those who need Him. *“Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you”* (John 20:21).

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.