

Worship on the Web



CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS

Season of Christmas

The season of Christmas begins on the 25 December and traditionally lasts twelve days ending on 5 January.

The meaning of Christmas

Christmas, or *Christ-mass*, meaning the feast of the Christ, is the time when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, in the New Testament of the Bible, give different accounts of the birth of Jesus. Both versions tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, and that she was a virgin when she became pregnant. In Luke's version Mary is visited by an angel who tells her she will give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:26 to 1:31), the Son of God promised in the Old Testament (Luke 1:32 to 1:35). Matthew says an angel also appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying not to be afraid to marry Mary despite the shame that these circumstances would bring in their society and culture (Matthew 1:18 to 1:25).

According to tradition, Mary and Joseph travelled on a long journey from Nazareth to register their names in a census. When they got there there was nowhere for the family to sleep so Jesus was born in a stable, the only accommodation they could find (Luke 2:1 to 2:7). Matthew tells the story of three men from the East who, after observing an unusual star, followed it to the stable where Jesus lay and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1 to 2:12). Luke says shepherds visited Jesus after an angel appeared to them (Luke 2:8 to 2:20).

The telling of the Christmas story has been an important part of the festival of Christmas, often dramatised in the form of a play usually referred to as the Nativity Play.

The origins of Christmas

Christmas may have originally been intended to coincide with the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, which was already celebrated throughout the ancient world. The Roman festival most often associated with Christmas is the festival of the Invincible Sun, *Natalis Solis Invicti*, celebrated on 25 December, which by 336 BCE the early church in Rome was hailing as the festival of the birth of the *Son of God*. There is no evidence to suggest that this date is the actual birthday of Jesus of Nazareth.

As a festival it has always had a common symbolism with other winter festivals. Eg. *Hannukah* in Judaism, *Divali* in Hinduism and *Winter Solstice* celebrations in Paganism all celebrate light overcoming darkness and are a time of joy, dancing, general revelry and the giving of gifts.

Christingle

The Christingle Service is a service of candle lights and can be held during Advent, Christmas or Epiphany.

The meaning of Christingle

The word 'Christingle' refers to the candle used in the Christingle service.

The Christingle is an orange, decorated with a red ribbon, sweets and nuts, in which is placed a small candle. The orange represents the world, the ribbon Christ's blood, shed for all creation. The sweets and nuts skewered on four cocktail sticks facing out to the four corners of the earth represent the fruits of the earth. The candle in the centre of the orange represents the light of Christ to the world.

The origins of Christingle

Christingle has its origins in a children's service held on Christmas eve 1747 in Marienborn, Germany. Bishop John de Wattville who was conducting the informal service gave each child a lighted candle, tied with a red ribbon, in memory of the Christ's coming which he said had kindled 'a flame in each heart which keeps burning to His joy, and our happiness'.

In 1968 the Church of England Children's Society adopted this service as a way of raising funds during the season of Advent. For more information about Christingle services visit their website www.the-childrens-society.org.uk