

Getting in the Picture About Christmas.

Why do we celebrate Christmas?

Because Christmas Day is the day when the Son of God, who is spirit, was born as a human being. When Jesus was born - a fact widely accepted - people didn't have birth certificates, so we don't know if the 25th December was His actual birth date. But over time the Church declared it to be His official birthday.

That's not as strange as it may seem for the Queen has two birthdays! Her actual personal birthday, on the 21st April and her official birthday, usually a date in June. Why does she have two? Because of the weather! A king or queen may be born in any month but the summer is more likely to be sunny for outdoor celebrations.

December 25th is Jesus official birthday. Why that day? Because of the climate! Various reasons are given for the church choosing December 25th but for me the main reason is this: Jesus describes Himself as 'the light of the world, born to rescue people from the devil's darkness, and this is symbolised by celebrating His birthday in December, the very dark time of the year.

We give each other gifts at Christmas. This goes back to the Three Wise Men, who followed a star, which led them to Jesus. They knew that this star signalled the birth of a special king, and they wanted to find Him and worship him. They brought Him three very expensive and yet practical gifts, gold, incense and myrrh.

So how does Santa Claus fit in? His name comes from a Christian called Nicholas, who lived 300 years or so after Jesus, in what is now Turkey. Sadly his parents died when he was very young. They left him a lot of money. He didn't hoard it; he didn't spend it on a round-the-world trip, he didn't use it to buy lots of stuff. He used the money to help the poor, including giving secret gifts to needy people. Because of his good works the ancient church recognised Nicholas as a Saint. Saint became changed to Santa and Nicholas shortened to Claus, so Saint Nicholas became Santa Claus.

We give presents in the hope of blessing others with something that will make them happy, improve their life, and show how much we love them. These are the same reasons Jesus was born. He was born to give us new life, and to bless our new lives with love, joy, peace and more besides, so showing us just how much God loves us.

Christmas has a mysterious wonder about it. Something about it speaks to our inner child, something hard to explain, but which makes it special. That goes back to Jesus Himself. He, the Son of God became a baby. This was no son of a man and a woman. Mary was a virgin, and no man made her pregnant. Joseph was Jesus' step-father not his biological father. Nor was Jesus the archangel Michael - or any other angel - lowering himself to be born a man.

The heart of the mystery of Christmas is that Jesus, God's Son, was born by the power of God as a boy to Mary, and so became a Son of Man. This is an everyday phrase in ancient Israel for referring to a human being.

Think about that ... Christ Jesus is God with God, He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being, in Him God's fullness dwells and by Him all things were created. Yet He humbled Himself to be born a man, to be an ordinary person just like one of us. God let Mary breast feed him, wash Him and toilet Him. And Jesus, who made everything, let Joseph, His step-father, teach Him to be a carpenter. That can be hard to grasp.

Why did He do it? This can be even harder to get your head around. Heaven wasn't boring, He didn't have to get away. He didn't want a few years fun, playing at being a man. This is the reason. He shared our humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free us from death. No archangel, who is only equal in power to the devil, could do that. Jesus was born to die, so we might live. That's hard to understand, but think of it this way. Say you have a child who is really, really sick. And there's nothing that will heal him except one thing only. One guaranteed, absolute, sure-fire cure for

his sickness. But it requires you to die. Your child's life is going to cost you your life. Would you make the exchange? You might say, yes of course.

Every one of us, child, woman and man, now and in every time, past, present and future suffers from an absolutely, incurable sickness. And it's heading your way at 60 seconds to the minute. There is - or as Leonard Cohen might have said - there ain't no cure for death. But - and this is the Big But that Jesus writes across the face of death - whoever believes in Him [that is entrusts their life to Him] shall not perish but have eternal life.

Like us Jesus was a human being but He is also something we are not. He never sinned, that is, He never did anything that wasn't right with God. Therefore He did not have to die, for death is the wages of sin. But Jesus freely chose to die, for us. That's why His death-day is called Good Friday. **The ultimate reason why we celebrate Christmas is Easter.**

Christmas celebrates God's gift to us of His own Son, so that whoever doesn't know God may know Him in and through Christ receive new life - not life for a few more years, not life in hardship and misery, not life in poverty and pain, but real, eternal, blessed life. What better thing could you give your children? Read how John says it in his gospel: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. ... He [came into] the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God ..."*

This Christmas we invite you to picture yourself with Jesus in your life. May He give you a new view of yourself, and of what you mean to God, to your family, to others and to yourself. Through Christ Jesus you can be more than a human being, you can be a child of God.

For more information about Christ Jesus, and with a chance to explore everyday questions about Him and the Christian faith see these two web sites:

<http://static.christianityexplored.org/tough-questions>

<http://alpha.org/>

