

Creative idea

to bring new life to your Christmas celebrations and traditions

Christmas is full of traditions that we use to celebrate with each year... some of them are connected to our worship, some to our culture, and some to our own family or friendship circles. Many are very precious and deeply connected to Christ and his story, bringing us closer to him as we practice them each year.

But sometimes, even the traditions actually inspired by Jesus can become distractions from him, rather than pointers to him. Often this is simply because they have just become 'what we do' rather than feeling directly connected to their meaning or inspiration any more. Other times, we have forgotten, or never even knew, the story of how they are connected to him.

By revisiting the stories behind our traditions – and the nations they have come from – and by hearing about some completely new ideas of how to celebrate Jesus' coming, we can reconnect or adapt any seemingly over familiar or secular customs back to the truth and wonder of Christ's love that first inspired them. The fact they also lead us on a mini, global tour full of learning from Christians around the world is a brilliant extra blessing, reminding us that Jesus came for all nations, peoples and cultures.



For each Christmas tradition you read about below, you could:

- thank God for how it captures and celebrates the truth and wonder of Christ's coming.
- use it as a worship trigger – and conversation piece– if it's something you will be participating in/doing yourself.
- consider if there is a new idea mentioned that you could adapt or incorporate into your celebrations to bring a sense of freshness and re-connection to Christ (and perhaps also, the global church too).
- pray for the nation(s) the tradition originates from – or will be particularly celebrated in – focusing especially on asking Jesus to help those who are so familiar with it to still find the connection to him that is in it.

You might also like to spend some time in general prayer, asking God to spark some completely new ideas and traditions for helping you and/or others grasp, celebrate and communicate the gospel message of Christmas, and get caught up in deeper worship and wonder as a result. What will bring new life to our celebrations in the twenty-first century? What new thing might start now that will become a helpful and meaningful tradition for future generations?

1. Calling Christmas Xmas and/or spreading seasonal or holiday greetings

Many of us understandably find it hard when Christ's name seems to get edited out of his own feast, especially in increasingly secular contexts where the focus of the celebration seems to be more about ourselves, or consumerism, than it is about him and his story.

But these different ways of referring to Christmas are not always bound up with a secularist agenda.

The X in Xmas is actually a Christogram – a symbol for Christ! (See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christogram>) It is 'Chi', the first letter of Christ in Greek. Its use as an abbreviation for Christmas dates back to the sixteenth century and was never in any way introduced to reduce emphasis on Christ.

Similarly, there wasn't really a secularist agenda behind the start of talking about the season or holidays instead of Christmas... it's just that in the USA, because the major festival of Thanksgiving happens on the third Thursday of November each year, there is a very close proximity between this holiday, and the beginning of Advent and Christmas. Additionally, America has a large Jewish community and their major festival of Hanukkah also falls in this same period of the year... as of course does the more cultural celebration of New Year. The collective term was originally meant as just that.

2. Crib scenes and nativity plays

a) They all started in Italy with St Francis of Assisi...

The story goes that in 1223, three years before his death, Francis was in Greccio, preparing to lead Midnight Mass for the villagers there when he realised there was not enough space in the church for everyone he thought might come...

In order to be able to include everyone – and impressed by a desire to "do something that will recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by" – he arranged for a live nativity to take place in a cave there.

b) The addition of *santons* or *little saints* in Provence and other French communities

Here, alongside the 'standard' figures in the nativity, crib scenes also incorporate many more *santons* (little saints) representing ordinary, contemporary people from the village or town, coming to worship the baby Jesus alongside the shepherds, wise men and angels... the baker, the priest, Monsuier or Madame from the house next door... everyone is brought to worship.

These figures actually first became popular in the years following the French Revolution. Public nativity scenes had been banned and churches closed, so making the little saints was actually developed as a way of secretly maintaining the religious traditions in people's own homes - at considerable risk.

4. The Christmas tree

Christmas trees first came to the UK in the 1830s and were made popular by Prince Albert. But they had been a tradition in Germany for longer.

Legend has it that, despite the evergreen associations with the pagan celebration of Yule, the first 'tannenbaum' or Christmas tree was actually the invention of Martin Luther, and was inspired by a direct connection to Christmas itself.

It is said that one snowy evening, he was overcome by the beauty of the starlit, sparkling fir trees, and was reminded of the star on the night the 'Christkind' or Christ child was born. To share this magical feeling with his children, he is said to have brought home a fir tree and clipped candles on to the branches to mimic the sense of them glistening in the snow.

5. Decorations

a) Chrismons

In 1957, in Virginia USA, Frances Spencer is said to have invented Chrismons (a word formed by blending Christ and monogram). These are handmade Christmas decorations in the shape of Christian symbols, specifically designed to remind people of Jesus during the Christmas season.

Many US Christians decorate their trees with homemade decorations depicting these different symbols of Christ. Some are more obvious shapes such as the cross, a lamb or a fish but some are more unusual such as an anchor, a lamp, a lion, a shell (symbolising baptism), a ship (representing the Church) or a butterfly (transformation).

These decorations are traditionally coloured white and gold because white is the liturgical colour for Christmas and symbolises Jesus' purity and perfection, and gold symbolises his majesty and glory.

Some churches also use a Christmas tree covered in Chrismons so visitors can come and hear the story of Jesus explained through these symbols.

b) Candy canes

According to legend, the Christmas Candy Cane originated in Germany. The story goes that a choirmaster in 1670 was worried about the children sitting quietly all through the Christmas nativity service. So he gave them something to eat to keep them quiet. As he wanted to remind them of Christmas, he made the previously straight white sugar sticks into a shape like a shepherd's crook, to remind them of the shepherds that visited the baby Jesus at the first Christmas.

People have subsequently given the candy cane some extra Christian meanings: the 'J' shape can also be used to symbolise Jesus; the white of the cane can represent the purity of Christ and the red stripes the blood he shed when he died on the cross; and the peppermint flavour has even been compared to the hyssop plant that was used for purifying in the Bible.

6. Gift-giver figures

a) St Nicholas, Bishop of Myra

On 6 December (especially in mainland Europe) people celebrate St Nicholas' Day – in some cases with parades and parties. (A few celebrate on the 5th or 19th instead.) And, most children in nations such as Germany and Greece find sweets, treats, coins and other small gifts in shoes (or clogs filled with straw) that they put out for St Nicholas to find before they go to bed the night before.

St Nicholas is the (substantially changed) origin of the UK's Father Christmas and Americans' Santa Claus figures but in both these nations, he has now become associated much more with Christmas Eve gift delivery than with his saints' day and the older Advent tradition on the continent.

But whenever we think of St Nicholas, and whatever we call him, the original story behind his 'gift-giving' is much more Jesus-like than our modern traditions convey. Because the original St Nick was Bishop of Myra (now in modern-day Turkey) – a man known for his generosity on many occasions, who most famously is said to have rescued the daughters of a poor man from being sold into prostitution on account of them having no dowry for marriage. He is said to have thrown gold balls to their father out of his carriage window on Christmas Eve, which incidentally is thought to be the origin of gold baubles and gold coins at Christmas too.

b) La Befana in Italy

Some Christmas gift giver figures that children wait for at Christmas are not any derivation of St Nicholas at all, but someone entirely different.

One of the nations that has its own distinct figure is Italy, and as with many Christmas traditions, there is a good deal of blending of secular folklore and genuine Christian connection together in the story that surrounds this character. But if you can get past the description of her as a 'good witch', there's a profound beauty to discover in the various stories Italians tell about her... here's an amalgamation of our favourite elements:

At the first Christmas, La Befana was sweeping her house when the wise-men came to visit, asking for directions on where to find the Christ Child. She didn't know but gave them shelter for the night. They asked her if she would like to come with them, but she said she was too busy. Later, seeing the star in the sky for herself, she had a change of heart and set out with home-baked goods to take to Jesus... but she was too late and couldn't find him.

Every year since, on the eve of Epiphany (the festival that takes place on 6 January to celebrate the arrival of the three wise-men) she searches again, gazing into the face of every child looking for the face of Christ, and leaving them gifts just in case they are the one... because every child of course carries something of the image of God.

c) The Three Kings in Latin America

In many Latin American countries, the Epiphany Holiday is as popular as Christmas. For example, in Argentina people dress up as the three kings and ride camels in public festivals and parades. During the festivities, children leave out cookies for *Los Reyes Magos* (The Three Kings) instead of Father Christmas, and some put out a shoe box filled with grass or hay to represent the manger and buckets of water for the kings' camels. If the children have been good all year, they receive toys left for them in the shoe boxes.

How wonderful that this gift-giver figure is so explicitly linked to the Christmas story. How much easier to explain - and how beautifully linked - to Jesus' birth it is than our Father Christmas.

7. Nine lessons and carols from Kings College, Cambridge

The 1914-18 war had been devastating. And the Christmases that followed it were difficult for those who survived. Grief, loss and the horror of what men had seen made it difficult for them to relate to faith at all. Some realised they had only gone to church because it was what was expected of them. And others had built a faith so confused with notions of 'God is on the side of the British Empire' that it could no longer stand.

Maggi Dawn writes in *Beginnings and Endings [and what happens in between]* (BRF 2007, p35)

"As the survivors returned, many discovered a complete loss of connection with the services and liturgies of the Church of England: words that had once seemed comforting and reassuring suddenly seemed alien, even quite offensive, in the light of their shattering wartime experiences.

"It was in response to this that Eric Milner White, the Chaplain of King's College Cambridge, constructed the now famous Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. He decided to abandon the structure of traditional liturgies for his Christmas service.

"Instead he took an existing idea that had been used by E.W. Benson at Truro Cathedral and adapted it, choosing nine readings from the Bible that told the story of salvation, and interspersed them with carols that illustrated the nine readings.

"His idea was that anyone... should be able to follow the story of salvation if it was told through these sequential readings and music."

8. Las Posadas

In Spanish speaking countries and communities, the celebrations for La Navidad (Christmas) often reach their peak with Las Posadas, which means 'shelter'. During this, families recreate the story of trying to find room at an inn in Bethlehem. For nine nights beginning on December 16 (and culminating on Christmas Eve), children dress up like Mary and Joseph and visit their neighbours as part of a candlelight procession. Sometimes they are accompanied by a donkey, or joined by other figures from the nativity such as angels.

At many of the doors where they knock and sing a special song, they are turned away. But there is always one each night (where the prayer and partying for that evening is being hosted) where they will be welcomed inside. Then there is dancing, piñatas and food for everyone!

9. The Poinsettia

This plant's association with Christmas is connected to a legend from Sixteenth Century Mexico. A girl, commonly called Pepita or Maria, was too poor to provide a gift for the celebration of Jesus' birthday and was inspired by an angel to gather weeds from the roadside and place them in front of the church altar. Crimson blossoms sprouted from the weeds and became poinsettias. From the 17th century, Franciscan friars in Mexico included the plants in their Christmas celebrations. The star-shaped leaf pattern is said to symbolise the Star of Bethlehem, and the red colour the blood and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

10. Boxing Day

Boxing Day – or the second celebration – is celebrated in the UK; other countries historically connected to it including Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand; and some European countries such as Germany.

Mostly now, it's a down day for most people after the festivities of Christmas itself, or perhaps a time when people expand their celebrations outwards from their nuclear family to include more extended family groups or friends in larger but more informal gatherings... but the origin was very specific.

It started in the UK during the Middle Ages as the day when the alms box (collection boxes for the poor often kept in churches) were traditionally opened so that the contents could be distributed to poor people.

Additionally servants used to be given this day off to celebrate Christmas with their own families, after serving the day before. And they were often given a boxed gift by their employees before they left. (Tradesman often got tips on this day too, sometimes travelling round to collect them in a box.)