

A CHRISTIAN A-Z of CHRISTMAS THINGS

OUTLINE – List of entries

Advent, Angels, Annunciation, Bethlehem, Bible, Birth of Jesus, Boxing Day, Carols, Christ, Christmas Cake, Christmas Cards, Christmas Day/25th December, Christmas Gospel, Christmas Tree, Crib, Elizabeth, Emmanuel, Gifts, Gold, Frankincense & Myrrh, Holly, Incarnate/Incarnation, Jesus, Joseph, Lights & Fires, Manger, Mary, Mince Pies, Mistletoe, Nativity, New Year's Day, Ox & Ass, Peace, Santa Claus, Shepherds, Simeon, Stable, Star, Turkeys, Twelfth Night, Virgin, Wise Men, Word, Xmas.

NOTE : When a word occurs which has its own entry (listed above),
it is printed in ***bold italic***.

ADVENT

- This is the name of the Church's pre-Christmas preparation season, lasting a month (much as the season of Lent precedes and prepares for Easter).
- The basis of the word **Advent** means simply *coming* or *arriving*.
(Our word *adventure* shares the similar meaning of an event that *comes to us*.)
A vent is a device that lets air *come* – either in or out.
- One **Advent** hymn begins: *Come thou long-expected Jesus born to set thy people free*.
The Jewish Nation had long awaited the coming of God's **Christ / Messiah**.
- The difference between Jews and Christians lies in their beliefs about **Jesus the Christ**.
Christians believe him to be the Messiah /**Christ**, while most Jews believe he was not.
- The earliest Christians were led by a Jewish minority (led by Peter and the Apostles) who – because of the Resurrection of **Jesus** from the dead – were convinced at the time that **Jesus** was the **Christ**.
- The **advent** of the **Christ / Messiah** is something which today's Jews await.
The **advent** of the **Christ / Messiah** is something which today's Christians celebrate – hence the name by which they are known – *Christ-ians*.

ANGELS

- Our T.V. newscasters would, in New Testament Greek, be called **angels!**
The word means no more than those who *announce*.
In the **Bible** they need not be supernatural.
- God cannot be seen – but it is a widespread Christian experience that God 'speaks' to those who choose to listen to him.
- Sometimes - usually on particularly important occasions - God provides a back-up to his message to us with something that we can hear and/or see to confirm it.

This can be the role of an **angel** – to make doubly-clear to the person concerned that God is saying something to them of particular importance.

- As the Christmas event was unique in human history, when God wanted people to know about it he needed to give them every back-up and encouragement possible to help them see and accept something so extraordinary! It is no surprise that God backed-up his messages with the use of **angels** to **Mary**, **Joseph**, the **Shepherds** and the **Wise Men**.
- The fairy on top of the **Christmas Tree** derives from the Christmas **angels**.
Angels is a religious word used to describe God's messengers.
When God and his message are ignored, the **angel** has no message or significance, and is often renamed a **fairy**.
- There is an enormous difference between the two!
A **fairy** generally represents something unreal, powerless and useless.
An **angel** is usually related to occasions of life-changing importance and power!
- Remember: the *message* is more important than the *messenger*.
- Don't argue about the nature of **angels** and miss the nature of God's message through them!
- God uses many, many means to back-up his messages to us.
As we are all so different, God invariably communicates to each of us in a way that he knows will help us most.
It is typical – and encouraging for us – that God only used a star to guide the **Wise Men** because they studied them; he did not use a star to guide the **Shepherds** !

ANNUNCIATION

- This unfamiliar word means no more than the *Announcement*.
It usually refers to the message given by God to **Mary** - that he had selected her to bear a child who would be the Saviour of the World. [Luke 1:26-38]
- Other people, e.g. **Joseph** and the **Shepherds**, were also given announcements by **angels** from God, but the term 'Annunciation' is usually confined to **Mary**.
- See also the entry under **Mary**.

BETHLEHEM

- Nowadays this place-name is almost synonymous with **Christmas**.
- **Joseph** had taken **Mary** and **Jesus** there because the Roman authorities were making a census of the population. To make their desk-work easier, they had asked the men to return to their home towns.
- That is why **Joseph** and **Mary** were wandering around with nowhere to sleep at **Bethlehem** in Judea when they lived over forty miles north in Galilee in a town called Nazareth.
(That is why **Jesus** is known as **Jesus of Nazareth** – not of **Bethlehem**.)
- One of the greatest figures in Jewish history was their great King David (traditionally the author of the Psalms). It was at **Bethlehem** that he had shepherded his father's flock, and it was at **Bethlehem** that he was anointed King by the prophet Samuel.

[1 Samuel 16:13]

- Because of this, **Bethlehem** was known as '*the city of David*' – as the **angel** described it to the **Shepherds** when he told them to go there [Luke 2:11]
*'to you is born this day in the City of David
a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'*
- When, much later, the **Wise Men** visited Palestine in search of the new-born King, they went, of course, to the capital Jerusalem to see Herod the King. Herod was a murderous non-Jew, and was alarmed by the **Wise Men's** hopes of a King. He asked his advisers where it was that the Jews thought that their **Christ** would be born.
- The question was not a difficult one!
'In **Bethlehem**' they replied, basing their answer on a passage in the Jewish Scriptures (i.e. the 'Old Testament') from Micah 5:2. In the traditional translation the Matthew quotation of it is:
*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.* [Matthew 2:6]
- Herod, therefore, sent the **Wise Men** to **Bethlehem**, and told them to inform him when they had found the child – because (so he claimed) he also wanted to 'worship' him. Herod wanted to do no such thing! He was a big-time murderer – as his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others, found out to their cost!
- God had no intention of allowing Herod to spoil his plans, so he warned the **Wise Men** not to return to the King, but to take another route home. [Matthew 2:12]
- As Herod already knew the town was the place of the **Birth of Jesus** – but did not know the actual house – he promptly ordered the massacre in **Bethlehem** of all children two years old and younger. [Matthew 2:16]
- The baby **Jesus** escaped because **Joseph** obeyed God and fled to Egypt, and stayed there until Herod was dead.
- John's Gospel provides an interesting link with **Bethlehem** [John 7:40-43]. When **Jesus**, as an adult, ministered in *his* home town, Nazareth (in Galilee), the inhabitants were in two minds about whether he was the **Christ** or not. The reason was this:
*When they heard these words,
some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.'
Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' [see entry under Christ]
But some asked,
'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?
Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David
and comes from **Bethlehem**, the village where David lived?'
So there was a division in the crowd because of him.*
- In **Bethlehem** today there stands the Church of the Nativity. In its basement there is a cave-shaped area and in the floor is set a silver star to mark the traditional site of the **Nativity**. It cannot be said with certainty to mark the exact place because Hadrian devastated the site in the 2nd century, and it remained like that for two centuries until re-discovered by Helena (mother of the Emperor Constantine).

- **Bethlehem** features in many carols but most famously in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Unlike most Christmas hymns it puts into words the worshipper’s personal relationship to the **Christ** in the memorable lines:

O holy child of **Bethlehem**,
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas **angels**
The great glad tidings tell.
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord, **Emmanuel**.

BIBLE

- There would be no celebration of **Christmas** if there were no **Bible**. It is in the **Bible** that certain writers (esp. Matthew and Luke) give accounts of the **Birth of Jesus**, and John, especially, reveals its meaning.
- There are some details of the Christmas Story that are not, in fact, in the Biblical accounts. These are assumptions, guess-work or legend, for example - the names of the **Wise Men**, that there were three of them, and that they worshipped the Infant Christ at the **Stable**.
- The **Bible** states only that there were three types of gifts, and carefully states they went into the **house**.
- See the entries under **Twelfth Night** and **Wise Men**.
- Most closely related to the topic **Bible** are the following entries:
Annunciation, Bethlehem, Birth of Jesus, Christ, Christmas Day, Christmas Gospel, Elizabeth, Emmanuel, Gold, Frankincense & Myrrh, Incarnation, Jesus, Joseph, Manger, Mary, Nativity, Peace, Shepherds, Simeon, Stable, Star, Virgin, Wise Men, and Word.

BIRTH OF JESUS

- Although Western society now makes a jamboree of **Christmas**, the earliest Christians did not celebrate the **Birth of Jesus!** (That's why Christ's birth-date was not important enough to remember.)
- The earliest Gospel, Mark, does not relate any **Christmas** stories. The account, in the Acts of the Apostles, of the earliest Christian proclamations of the Gospel contains no references to the **Christmas** stories either! In all of St. Paul's New Testament writings there is no mention of the Christmas events except to affirm that Jesus was really human, i.e. 'born of a woman'. [Galatians 4:4]
- The reason for the long delay before Christians thought about **Christmas** is as follows. Who **Jesus** was and what he *did* are most clearly seen at the *other end* of his life – his Passion, his Death, his Resurrection, his Ascension, and his gift of the Holy Spirit.

On average, a third of each Gospel account is about **Jesus's** Passion, his Cross and his Resurrection.

- Due to later calculations and miscalculations, the year of the **Birth of Jesus** was not A.D.1 (as we might assume) but probably a few years earlier.
- Herod the King, to whom the **Wise Men** went initially, later ordered the slaughter of all children in **Bethlehem** aged two or younger.
- Herod died in 4 B.C. so **Jesus** has to have been born in 4 B.C. or earlier.
- **Joseph** took **Mary** to his home town **Bethlehem** to be registered because the Romans were taking a census. Luke says that it took place when '*Quirinius was Governor of Syria*' [Luke 2:2]. We know that Quirinius was a Consul elsewhere until 12 B.C. So that narrows the gap for Jesus's birth to between 11 and 4 B.C.
- The gap can be narrowed still further.

We know from non-Biblical sources that Quirinius was Military Governor from 7-6 B.C. – but he might have had an earlier tour of duty between 11 B.C. and 9 B.C.

The data and arguments for a more specific date are not that strong.

- Since the actual year of the Birth of Jesus is not that important it can best be left somewhat 'open', although the period 7-6 B.C. seems the most likely. (The question of the date is very complex and only a general outline is given here.)
- See also entry under **Star**.

BOXING DAY

- Many Churches have 'boxes' at the back of the building into which donations are put. Traditionally these offerings were distributed to the poor.
- The clergy used to open them on the day after **Christmas**, so it became known as **Boxing Day** – so it is to do with boxes – not boxing!
- December 26th is actually the Feast Day of **St. Stephen**.
St. Stephen was *neither* one of the Twelve Apostles *nor* a writer of any New Testament book, but was chosen to be remembered on the day following the **Birth of Jesus**.
- The reason for this special honour was because **St. Stephen** was the first Christian recorded in the New Testament as being killed for his faith. He was stoned to death in about A.D.35. (Saul watched the murder. He was influenced by it, was later converted to **Christ** and renamed Paul.)
- The early Christians did not adopt the pagan custom of paying much attention to ordinary birthdays. They gave the custom a specifically Christian twist – they confined the word to the date of a Christian's *martyrdom*! At death, they believed, was when his/her new life *really* began!
- Christians have always highly honoured those of any century who have given their lives in loyalty to the Lord. The word *martyr* is simply the Greek (and therefore the New Testament) word for *witness*. Its present meaning came about because there is no more powerful or greater Christian witness than to give one's life for one's Lord.
- In placing St. Stephen's Day immediately after Christmas Day, the Church wanted to remind the followers of Jesus that they should not wallow in Christmas, but witness to what God has done – no matter what the cost.

CAROLS

- The French word *carole* was a dance, and it originally celebrated the shortest day of the year.
Nowadays a *carol* is less formal than a hymn, and is used at times other than Christmas. There are *carols*, for example, for Advent, as well as Christmas.
- For many centuries church services were in Latin, and it was not until the time of St. Francis of Assisi (1182 -1226) that *carols* were first sung in peoples' ordinary everyday language.
- In England *carols* were first sung by minstrels in the halls of the great Lord's houses, and then by street-singers.
This last tradition is still carried on today, and is coupled with the tradition of giving to the poor.
- A *Carol* Service is one of the most popular church events at Christmas because it is the easiest for those unfamiliar with Church services to enjoy. Its structure is very simple – *Carols* and Hymns interspersed with Readings.
- Its popularity owes much to the regular broadcast on Christmas Day of the *Carol* Service from King's College Chapel, Cambridge.
The excellence of the music, the retention of old-fashioned language, and the absence of any direct explanation of the meaning of Christmas or challenge to accept it, make it a very easy thing to enjoy without necessarily any personal involvement or spiritual commitment to anything.
- To the Christian believer the King's College tradition can be an enrichment.
- To the unbeliever, however, its very considerable removal from the everyday *may* shift the reality of Christmas further away from everyday life – akin to the reality of a concert – rather than bring it nearer.
- Such *distancing* of the *Birth of Jesus* can run contrary to the Christmas message that God took an unprecedented step to meet us where we *are*!

CHRIST

- '*Christ*' is not a surname. In fact it is not a name at all!
'Christ' is a title. As we write and speak of 'William the Conqueror' so, strictly speaking, we should speak of '**Jesus the Christ**'. **Christ** is simply the Greek word, i.e. the New Testament word, for *Messiah* – the long-awaited deliverer.
That is why the New Testament frequently speaks of '*the Christ*'. Herod the King, for example, after being told by the *Wise Men* of Jesus's birth asks his religious leaders '... *where the Christ would be born*'. (The Authorized Version dropped the '*the*' of the original Greek in this verse but most modern translations reinstate it.)
- The Jews anointed their Kings with oil (as the British still anoint their Sovereign at his/her Coronation) and also anointed with oil their Priests and Prophets. This was a sign of God's very special favour and selection. [See the article **Understanding Anointing**.]
- The Jews looked forward to a time when one person, God's Anointed One or 'Messiah', would be all these things, and come and save them.
- The 'Messiah', the Anointed One, is in New Testament Greek simply the '*Christos*'.

- In Greek, the first two letters (*chi* and *rho*) look like X and P. These are often combined as a monogram in churches and on Christian things.
- It is where the X comes from in *Xmas*.
- See also entry under *Xmas*.

CHRISTMAS CAKE

- *Christmas Cake* was, probably, originally the *Twelfth Night Cake*, but was brought back to Christmas since more people gathered together at Christmas than they did at the Feast of the Epiphany.
- For its significance, see the entry under *Twelfth Night Cake*.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

- The invention of printing made cards popular, but at first they were New Year cards – not *Christmas cards*. There is one in the British Museum dated 1467.
- Sometimes the senders of these cards remembered the *Birth of Jesus*.
- But it was not until 1900 that the Germans began to send cards with Christmas Greetings on them and adorn them with *holly*, snow scenes and the scenes of the *Nativity*.
- For designs of Christmas cards see '**Christmas Resources**' on this website, and for their use see the article '**Getting Christmas Right**'.

CHRISTMAS DAY / 25th DECEMBER

- Because of a change in the calendar, the shortest day of the year is now 21st December.
- But long before *Jesus* and until A.D.221 it fell on the *25th December*.
- Pagans took the day off, and used rituals in an attempt to guarantee the Sun's return.
- It was an obvious date for Christians to adopt to celebrate the *Birth of Jesus* (whose actual birth-date was not recorded), because Jesus taught that he was the *light of the world*. [John 8:12, 9:5]

The *Christmas Gospel* calls him the *true light* [John 1:9]. *Simeon* predicted that the Christ-child in his arms would be a *light for revelation to the Gentiles* [Luke 2:32], and would be the *glory* of the Jews.

CHRISTMAS GOSPEL

- This is the name given to the first section of St. John's Gospel, which is almost invariably read in churches and chapels at Christmas.
- The reason is clear. When Mark wrote his Gospel, the earliest, it was mostly concerned with who Jesus was and what he did for us. He was God; he died for us and was raised from the dead.
- When, later, Matthew and Luke used Mark's account to write their Gospels, each one of them prefaced Mark's story with material they had researched about *Jesus's earlier life*.

- Mark's early Gospel, by itself, *could* give the impression that **Jesus** was not always divine, but that God had somehow put 'divinity' onto him at his adult Baptism in the Jordan. [Mark 1:11]
- Was **Jesus** always divine-and-human from his birth? It was a key question that the Christian community had to discern.
- Matthew and Luke answered the question with a resounding YES! Their very different **Nativity** stories (one from **Mary's** viewpoint and the other from **Joseph's**) showed that **Jesus** was God-with-us, '**Emmanuel**'. [Matthew 1:23]
- John, the last Gospel to be written, pushed the question even further back. Was **Jesus** invented from nothing at his birth? Or was he always really God who became one of us?
- John's answer was that **Jesus** was *always God*. John could not use the name **Jesus** before **Christ's** birth and naming, so he called him God's **Word**.
- God's '**Word**', he taught, had always existed. Indeed God's **Word** was active in Creation itself! John then made the staggering claim –
the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
- This is the real meaning of Christmas, and so John's account is almost always chosen as the **Christmas Gospel** – for Matthew and Luke mainly just describe the events.
- John makes clear that at **Bethlehem** it was God himself who stepped into our history to save/rescue us.
- See also entry under **Word**.

CHRISTMAS TREE

- In the West we have shops packed with Christmas decorations.
- In the past the only decorations at Christmas were the evergreen trees and plants. They were practical and available, and compared with other plants, did not appear to die in wintertime, but were a symbol of life.
- Legend has it that one December night St. Boniface came across a group of pagans who had met beneath an oak tree to offer a young boy as a human sacrifice. Boniface (a name which in Latin means 'Good Deeds' and nothing to do with his complexion!) rescued the boy and hacked the oak tree down.
- Among its roots was a little fir tree. Boniface said to those present:
*From this night this little tree will be your holy emblem.
It is the wood of peace because your homes are built of it.
It is a sign of eternal life for its leaves are ever green.
It points to heaven, and shall henceforth be called –
the tree of the Christ-Child.*
- We in the West think we know what a **Christmas Tree** looks like. Not necessarily! A **Christmas Tree** does not have to be a fir tree – the **Christmas Tree** of Indian Christians is a mango tree!

CRIB

- The meaning of some words used at Christmas seems to drift a little between one era and another and between one country and another. The word '**crib**' is such an example.

- One famous Christmas **Carol** goes :
Away in a manger, no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.
- A **manger** is an animal's feeding trough. Of that there is no doubt. (See entry under **manger**.)
- But the **carol** writer's dismay that **Jesus** had *no crib for a bed* takes **crib** to mean a proper baby's cot, as in the American replacement of the British '*cot-death*' by '*crib-death*'.
- But **crib** can be used to mean the **manger**, and also the scene centred around it!
- Thus a **crib** can be the word used where figures or real people depict the scene of the **Birth of Jesus**.
- St. Francis of Assisi in Italy in the year 1223 wanted Christians to realise the harsh reality of the event of Christ's Birth. He used real people and live animals, and used the occasion to preach to those who saw it the meaning of God becoming one of us.
- See also **Nativity**.

ELIZABETH

- Was **Mary's** cousin. She was elderly but God promised that she would bear a child!
- This was an integral part of God's plan, for when God's **angel** told **Mary** that God was asking her to bear his **incarnate** Son, the **angel** could point to God's work in **Elizabeth's** life and deliver the famous punch-line '*For nothing will be impossible with God.*' [Luke 1:37]
- In Luke's Gospel the near-miraculous birth of John (later, the Baptizer) to **Elizabeth** paves the way for the miraculous birth of **Jesus** to **Mary**. [Luke 1:5 – 2:40]
- **Elizabeth's** situation was a divine set-up to encourage **Mary**.
- The aged **Elizabeth** was pregnant, therefore, when **Mary** rushed to her with the news that God had just told her that he had chosen her, i.e. **Mary**, to bear his Son. A traditional and frequently-read Christmas reading begins:

*And in the sixth month, the Angel Gabriel was sent from God
unto a city of Galilee named Nazareth
to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph , of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.*

I once read it to a gathering of about sixty Christians and then asked them to what the *sixth month* referred. I received many answers - some amusing, but all of them wrong! It refers to sixth month of **Elizabeth's** pregnancy! - which Luke was describing in the previous verses. My disappointment with their knowledge was increased by the fact that it was a Mothers' Union gathering!

- The baby within **Elizabeth** leaps for joy at the arrival of **Mary**.
- See also entry under **Mary**.

EMMANUEL

- An Old Testament writer wrote *The Lord himself will give you a sign, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.* [Isaiah 7:14] This was taken by Christians to refer to **Jesus Christ**.
- The author of Matthew's Gospel quoted this and explained **Emmanuel** as *God is with us.* [Matthew 1:23]
- That's a great summary of the Christmas message!

GIFTS

- It is only in English-speaking and German-speaking countries that gifts are given at Christmas.
- Such giving reflects the **gifts** given to Jesus by the **Wise Men/Kings**, but it also symbolises more than that.
- The greatest **gift** of all is the **gift** of God himself come to earth for us, as the Scripture puts it – *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* [John 3:16]
- It is good if Christians try to ensure that the **gifts** they give at Christmas are in keeping with the Christmas message. [This is dealt with very thoroughly in the article **Getting Christmas Right.**]

GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH

- These **gifts** were given by the **Wise Men** after they had worshipped the baby **Jesus.** [Matthew 2:11]
- Their *precise* significance is unclear. Like many good symbols they operate at a number of levels, and may be 'read' in different ways.
- One line of reflection sees the **gold** as a symbol of Christ being the King; the **incense** being a symbol of Christ being a Priest, and **myrrh** – which is used for embalming – as a symbol of Christ's Sacrificial Death for us.
- If the **Wise Men** were Magi then the gifts can be interpreted as that of astrologer-magicians laying the tools of their trade at the feet of **Christ** whose coming renders occult activities obsolete. ('Occult' means 'hidden'; whereas **Christ** is revealed. See entry under **Twelfth Night.**)
- See also the entry **Wise Men.**

HOLLY

- The word '**holly**' may have come from the word '**holy**'.
- In Norway it is known as a *Christ-thorn*, and in Denmark the *Kristorn*.
- In Christian tradition the prickly leaves of the **holly** remind us of **Christ's** suffering and the crown of thorns. When seen in that connection, the red berries of the **holly** can remind us of the Blood of **Christ** which he shed for us.
- The **holly-wreath** is an American custom now used more widely. The *circular* wreath speaks of eternity, as does its ever-green, non-dying leaves.

INCARNATE / INCARNATION

- We are familiar with the main part of the word **in-carn-ate**. *Carnal* desires are desires according to the *flesh*. And when a battle ends in *carnage* there are *bodies* everywhere.
- The basic word means *flesh/meat*.
- In the **Christmas Gospel** we hear from St. John's Gospel that the **Word** 'became flesh'. Expressed simply, **in-carnate** means becoming flesh.
- **Jesus** was God **incarnate**. **Christmas** celebrates God's **incarnation**.
- In the Christian statements of belief (Creeds) there is the phrase *and was made man*. Such is the wonder of it and the humility of God that some Christians emphasise its importance publicly by bowing or even kneeling during the saying of these words during a service.
Such a bow is an outward symbol whereby the worshipper uses his/her body to say 'I acknowledge God's humility in becoming one of us and want to be humble before him – and I am not ashamed to witness the fact to others.'
- It may not be our practice to do this, but our wonder should be no less than those who do.

JESUS

- The father in a Jewish family was the one to name the child, so it was **Joseph**, not **Mary**, who was instructed by God to call the child **Jesus**.
The name **Jesus** means *God-saves*.
- **Jesus** was not the first to be so named.
Joshua was a famous military leader in Jewish history. One of **Jesus's** ancestors was a **Jesus**, as were four High Priests between 35 B.C. and A.D.65.
One of Paul's companions was '**Jesus** who is called *Justus*' [Colossians 4:11]. There are a couple of New Testament folk who had a father called **Jesus** as is shown by the form of the name *Bar-Jesus*. [Acts 13:6]
- See also the entries **Christ**, **Emmanuel**.

JOSEPH

- **Joseph** was betrothed to **Mary** when God intervened and called **Mary** to bear a child.
- The teaching of Scripture and Christian tradition is that this was accomplished without the aid of a human father.
- **Joseph**, therefore, does not feature to the extent that he deserves in Christian thought.
- It seems that the author of Matthew used traditions of the **Birth of Jesus** going back mainly to **Joseph**.
- **Joseph** is, like **Mary**, a great example of free and brave obedience to God, not restricted by human assumptions.
- The name **Jesus** was God's choice for the child for he would '*save his people from their sins*' (see entry under **Jesus**). God revealed this to **Joseph** [Matthew 1:21] because it was the father of a Jewish family who did the naming.

- **Joseph**, according to the account in Matthew's Gospel, took major initiatives for the safety of **Jesus** and **Mary**.
It was **Joseph** who decided, when **Mary** was found to be pregnant, to choose the kinder of two options open to him, and to protect her from the public criticism.
It was **Joseph** who was obedient enough to ditch his plans when God revealed to him that the child was conceived '*by the Holy Spirit*' [Matthew 1:20], and who did as God's messenger told him.
Joseph took **Mary** as his wife, but did not have intercourse with her until after the birth of **Jesus**. [Matthew 1:25 – see entry under **Virgin**.]
It is **Joseph** whom God prompts to ensure the safety of **Jesus** and **Mary** by fleeing to Egypt, and it is **Joseph** whom God prompts to return once King Herod is dead.
[Matthew 2:13-21]

KINGS – see under WISE MEN

LIGHTS AND FIRES

- The Pagans thought that the Sun would be encouraged to 'return' after the shortest day by lighting fires and lights to encourage 'him'. So fires had an important role on **25th December**.
- See entry under **Christmas Gospel**.

MAGI - see under WISE MEN

MANGER

- Because they are widely used but not always understood, some of the Christmas words seem to shift and slide their meanings. **Manger** and **crib** are two of them.
- A **manger** is simply an animals' feeding trough. (Note the French word *manger* to eat.) But it is sometimes used more widely e.g. it is possible to talk of a **manger-scene** which would contain more than just **Jesus** lying in a feed-trough. In this case it becomes nearly equivalent to **stable**.
- **Mary** had to use the animals' feeding trough as a cot for her child – with perhaps all the difficulty and worry of the bewildered and hungry animals not understanding the change!

MARY

- **Mary** was chosen by God to bear his Son **Jesus**. The event that began this is known as the **Annunciation** (i.e. Announcement) when God's **angel** came to her, told her that God had chosen her, and heard **Mary's** co-operation and consent in the now-famous words:
Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word. [Luke 1:38]
- **Mary** immediately rushed off to her cousin **Elizabeth** (who was already pregnant according to God's unexpected promise).

- **Elizabeth** was so happy that she sang a song in praise of God that has become famous. It begins (not surprisingly) with the words **Hail Mary** (or in Latin **Ave Maria**). **Elizabeth's** song [Luke 1:42] in later years became the 'Hail Mary'. (The 'Hail Mary' today usually has the 'Holy Mary' prayer added to it.)
- It is because **Elizabeth** sang that **Mary** was '*blessed among women*' that most Christians down the ages have not given her the usual Christian title '*Saint*' but the title '*Blessed*'.
- **Mary's** other title '**Virgin**' is used to distinguish her from the other Mary's of the New Testament. In coming as a person to live among us and save us, God was doing something not only utterly wonderful, but utterly new. The theme of **virginity** rightly understood in Scripture is not – as nowadays – primarily concerned with the absence of sexual intercourse, but with newness and dedication to God.
- For further comments see under **Virgin**.

MINCE PIES

- In earlier times these were not round, but oval or shaped like a cradle.
 - It was done to remind people of the **manger** in which **Jesus** was born.
 - They were to eat them quietly as they remembered with wonder the infant **Jesus**.
 - This moment of religious reflection has been changed, by those who are not religious, into 'making a wish'. It would be a good idea if Christians changed it back again!
 - Such wish-making differs from praying.
Making a wish is usually addressed to the unknown and unknowable ('Fate'? 'Chance'? 'Destiny'? 'Fortune'? 'the gods', etc) in the very remote hope of getting something we want.
(It can, of course, provide an opportunity for us to express aloud wishes that we hope will be overheard by others to our advantage!)
- Paul teaches '*let your requests be made known unto God*'. Unlike a wish, a prayer is addressed to God - who is known, who is loved, and who is served. Three things very close indeed to the Christmas message.

MISTLETOE

- The use of mistletoe has pagan roots.
- The great Sun-God was called 'Balder', and the other gods promised never to harm him, and laid their spells to protect him. But they forgot to protect him from mistletoe. Another god – a baddie – knew this, and so slew the Sun-God by an arrow of mistletoe. The Sun-God was killed – but the other gods brought him back to life again.
- Mistletoe promised never to harm anyone again, and so became a symbol of love – hence the tradition of kissing under it.
- For Christians the story has a deep theme of love conquering evil. This is the essence of the work of Christ and the Christian Gospel.

NATIVITY

- The word comes from the Latin word meaning '*birth*'.

- A **Nativity** Play is a play that centres on the *Birth of Jesus*.
- In the Middle Ages the 'Miracle Plays' as they were called began to be performed on large carts called *pageants* which were drawn from one place to another.
- Once they were no longer written by the clergy to be played in Church, they became less restrained in their humour!
- When the *nativity* scene is depicted by figures it is usually called a *crib*.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

- Not all years start on January 1st! Schools, Taxation Departments, banks, gardeners and the Christian Church all start at other times.
- The Christian Year starts about a month before Christmas, when it prepares to celebrate the *Birth of Jesus* at Christmas, and, later, his Passion and Resurrection at Easter.
- The position of Christmas makes complete sense within the Church's year, but must appear as complete nonsense when viewed between one January and the next! When transposed into the secular calendar Christians appear to get things backwards! They appear to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection *before* they celebrate his birth!
- Because the Church's *New Year* takes place some five weeks or more before January 1st, Christians have never had much reason to celebrate the *secular New Year*.
- Many countries, e.g. Scotland, celebrate it with more fervour than Christmas. The giving of *gifts* at *New Year* has nothing directly to do with celebrating the *Birth of Jesus*.
- In Anglo-Saxon England *New Year's Day* was – guess when? – **December 25th!**
- *New Year's Day* only became the first of January in 1582, when the then Pope shifted it back to the date used in Ancient Rome.

OX AND ASS

- There were undoubtedly animals in the *stable* in which *Mary* gave birth to *Jesus*.
- What they were is a matter of pure conjecture.
- Christians must be careful not to let sentiment undermine truth. Any supposition that the animals understood and bowed in adoration to the Lord *Jesus* is not in Scripture or other reliable historical record.

To promote such ideas is dangerous: it invents miracles without adequate foundation, and by 'softening' Christmas it somewhat undermines the wonder and reality of God opting to be really born among us, unprotected from life's harsh realities.

- Christians have sometimes been led by their feelings to claim miracles on inadequate grounds. It gives pleasure to the religious, but has no place among the followers of *Jesus* - who claimed to be *Truth*. [John 14:6]
- See entry under *stable*.

PEACE

- No *Christmas* A-Z would be adequate without an entry for the word *peace*.

- The famous message of the **angel** to the **Shepherds** had two parts –
*Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace, goodwill towards men.*
- The longing for **peace** is strongest when our lives are, or seem, threatened.
- The accounts of the first Christmas contain the promise of peace, but not universal peace.
Joseph has to take **Mary** and **Jesus** away to avoid Herod's men slaughtering **Jesus**.
[Matthew 2:13-14]
The infants in **Bethlehem** are slaughtered by order of King Herod.
Simeon predicts that a 'sword' will pierce **Mary's** heart!
The **Wise Men** have to avoid persecution by Herod.
Elizabeth's child (John) is eventually beheaded!
Mary's child **Jesus** is eventually crucified!
- Against these we must note the joy of **Simeon**, **Elizabeth**, **Mary**, the **Shepherds**, the **Wise Men**. The first three all break into song!
Simeon's song (in the old translation) begins
*'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant
depart in peace.'*

SAINT NICHOLAS see SANTA CLAUS

SANTA CLAUS

- St. Nicholas (**Santa Claus** is the same) used to ride around and leave presents for children in their wooden clogs.
- North American children used to believe that '**Santa Claus**' had to travel over the North Pole to reach them – hence his use of a sledge and reindeer.
- As they wore laced leather shoes rather than clogs they hung up *stockings* instead – in the hope of getting more presents!
- '**Santa Claus**' has been giving to children world-wide since the 19th century.
- He was first depicted in *Harper's Weekly* in 1863 by an artist Thomas Nast. He showed 'Father Christmas' as we know him today with his scarlet robes trimmed with white fur. It was actually a version of the traditional Bishops' winter attire!
When Australians celebrate Christmas on the beach in mid-summer, their 'Father Christmas' wears only a large white beard and a scarlet pair of bathing trunks!
- When children are told the truth about 'Father Christmas', it is important to ensure that they do not throw out the baby **Jesus** with the bathwater!
- If they are old enough to know the truth – it is important that they are told the greatest truth of all – that God's Son was born at **Bethlehem**.
(Many parents take the line that children should 'decide the truth when they are old enough'. But that requires that they be told truths so they have something to select from! Once children become adults they cannot decide to believe B rather than C, if they have never been informed of B.)

- It would be tragic if any child rejected the **incarnation** of God as a fairy-tale, and something to grow out of – rather than *into*!

SHEPHERDS

- The first to see the baby **Jesus** were the **Shepherds** [Luke 2:8-20], having been informed of his birth by God's Messengers (see **Angels**).
- Thus it was the poor rather than the rich who first recognised the **Christ**.
- The Bible does not record what they offered to Jesus – they had no time to prepare because they arrived *in haste* [Luke 2:16].
- *The Shepherds, we read, returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.* [Luke 2:20]
- The purpose of all Christian activities over Christmas is that we might do the same!
- See also entry under **Bethlehem**.

SIMEON

- He was a devout Jew who waited expectantly for God's Messiah/**Christ** whom he believed he would see before he died.
- When **Mary** and **Joseph** were in the Temple at Jerusalem, **Simeon** took the baby **Jesus** in his arms, and sang a short hymn of praise – which most Christians still use. His song's meaning can be paraphrased as:

*Lord, you may now let me, your servant, die in peace
because in seeing Jesus I have actually seen the Saviour!
He is the one for whose coming you have prepared the world.
He will be the Light for non-Jews everywhere,
and he will be your crowning-glory for your Chosen People.*
- This Song has often been known by the first two words of its Latin translation *Nunc Dimitis*.
- The significance of **Simeon's** Song is almost too great to be grasped!
- **Simeon** states that the Jewish Messiah/**Christ** has not come simply to serve and save the nation into which he was born, but would give light to the whole non-Jewish world, i.e. the Gentiles!
- Had **Simeon's** insight been wrong, there would be no Christians outside of the Jewish race, nor would **Christmas** be celebrated worldwide. God's salvation through **Christ** would not, in practice, have been offered to all, regardless of race or religion, had **Jesus** not been a *light to lighten the Gentiles*.

STABLE

- A **stable** is a place that shelters animals. In olden times there was not the rigid separation between the accommodation of people and animals that we have today.
- The **stable** may have been the animals 'living quarters' adjoining, or even part of, a home.

- Tradition has it that it may have been a cave. Under the Church of the *Nativity* at **Bethlehem** is a cave where a silver star marks the alleged place of **Jesus's** birth.

STAR

- Various Christian writers have tried to 'account for' the **Star** which first alerted the **Wise Men** to the birth of a King in the West.
- Some think that it was the conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Venus in 4 B.C.; while others feel that such a conjunction of *planets* would not be called a 'star'.
- **Jesus's** contemporaries were not ignorant of the solar system. Four hundred years earlier they could, for instance, predict eclipses.
- The **Star** might, some think, have been a rare and unpredictable *supernova*. I like the devotional comment of M.T. Fermer: *It is not unfitting that a billion times the light of the sun be poured out to herald the birth of the Saviour of the World.*
- But the importance of the **star**, like the importance of **angels**, lies not in itself, but what it *points to*.
- How it did that, and what precisely it was, are questions which get eclipsed by how God used it and what, in his plans, it accomplished.
- The **Star** led the wise and the searching to **Jesus** and resulted in their worshipping him. From a Christian standpoint – is there anything greater or more glorious?
- May the **stars** that we will be displaying or seeing this Christmas be used in the same way!

THREE KINGS - see WISE MEN

TURKEYS

- The main meat at the *Christmas* Feast has varied. In olden times it was pork because pigs were killed in late November.
- They were later replaced with peacocks, that could look particularly festive.
- Turkeys replaced peacocks around the year 1700.
- Christianity has strong traditions both of feasting and of fasting.
- The important days in the Christian year have always been called Feasts! In the year 601, the then Pope ordered Christians *no longer to offer beasts to devils* (a reference to animal sacrifices) *but to worship God by feasting*. They did.
- So there is strong Christian significance in a special meal, but there is no particular significance in the meat chosen at Christmas.

TWELFTH NIGHT

- Traditionally the last day of the Christmas period.
- Most of the Christmas stories describe Jews recognising who **Jesus** was, but the Christmas period ends with celebration of non-Jews recognising and worshipping him.
- These are the folk who are variously described as '**Wise Men**', 'Kings', or 'Magi' from the East.

- The **Wise Men** did not visit the **stable**, but saw the child **Jesus** later, in the '*house*'. [Matthew 2:11] This is why they are celebrated *after Christmas Day*.
- This celebration is called the Feast of the Epiphany – a word that means revealing/showing/ making known (the opposite of the word '*occult*' – which means '*hidden*' and is secretive).
- The principle task of Christians is to make **Christ** known to the world. That's what God's Church is designed and potentially empowered to do.
- There used to be a **Twelfth Night Cake** eaten – probably with spices from the East – but this has now become the **Christmas Cake**.

VIRGIN

- Initial comments on this subject are under the entry **Mary**.
- There are three views among Christians about **Mary's virginity** -
 1. A few hold that as they cannot understand it, it is therefore 'impossible', it could not have happened, and the Biblical writers are wrong.
 2. Some believe that **Mary** remained a **virgin** until Joseph married her.
 3. Some believe that **Mary** was *always* a **virgin**.
- Since we only know reliably of **Mary** and **Jesus** from the **Bible** it is right to put its witness above and before later traditions.
- To summarise my detailed study on the subject of Jesus' brothers (which will later appear on this web-site) we can state clearly the **Bible** view. It is -
 1. That the child **Jesus** was conceived in some special way in a 'new' and creative act of God.
 2. That **Joseph** refrained from intercourse with **Mary** until after **Jesus** was born.
 3. That **Jesus** had brothers and sisters. There are seventeen direct references to them by five different New Testament authors over a period of forty years. During this time the later writers never '*corrected*' the earlier descriptions of *brothers*.
- The view officially held by all Roman Catholics that Mary was *always* a Virgin can only be held when non-Biblical material is brought in, e.g. that the 'brothers' were really half-brothers or step-brothers. They may have been – but my point here is that that is not what Scripture itself teaches us, if we are to take Scripture as our primary source.
- To believe that they were really *cousins* is often put forward but is untenable. The words *brother* and *cousin* in the New Testament are quite different. St. Paul used both. If the New Testament writers thought that **Jesus's 'brothers'** were really '*cousins*' we should assume that their divine inspiration would have prompted them to say so and not mislead us!
- Having outlined the main beliefs relating to **Mary's virginity** it must be pointed out that in Christian thinking (like many other aspects of life) there is a 'hierarchy of Truth', i.e. not all truths are of equal standing.
- On this 'ladder' of Truth – it must be quite obvious that the truth that God was born among us, is considerably more important than the means of the child's conception, the nature of his birth, or the subsequent marital experience of his mother.

WISE MEN

- This is one of the descriptions of those who came from the East to worship **Jesus**.
- Later Christian tradition read certain Old Testament references *into* the story [e.g. Psalms 72:10, Isaiah 49:7] and thought of them as Kings.
- The **Wise Men** were those who studied the stars. The Greek describes them as *magoi* – and sometimes they are described, therefore, as the *magi* (pronounced *may-jigh*).
- It is difficult to pin-down exactly how the writer of Matthew viewed them. The word broadened its meaning over the years, so that by the time of St. Paul, when Simon was described as a *magus*, it was because he dealt in magic.
- We don't know how many there were. At different times their assumed numbers have varied greatly.
- Their **gifts** included three different things, **gold, frankincense and myrrh**, so most people have tended to assume that there were just three of them (e.g. 'We three kings of Orient are...'). This certainly makes it easier for painters and stained-glass designers than having a vast crowd to depict!
- In some traditions they have even acquired names: Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar – though the Bible does not even mention how many, let alone their names.
- Christians have seen in their **gifts** – somewhat unfamiliar to most of us – symbols of **Jesus's** status and destiny. (See entry under **gold, frankincense and myrrh**.)
- It is also possible to interpret these **gifts** as the stock-in-trade of their astrological craft, and that in giving them to Jesus, they lay aside once and for all, their search via the stars to find the meaning and purposes of life.
- The present-day tendency to relate our life with the stars is rendered out-of-date by the coming of **Christ** at Christmas. Such searching for hidden meanings is pointless when the meaning of life is already on display – first in a cradle, and then on a cross.

WORD

- Words are how we express ourselves. If we 'give our **Word**' it is – or should be – a solemn personal commitment to another.
- In the fourth Gospel (St. John), the writer used the term **Word** in a way unfamiliar to most of us.
- He believed that **Jesus** experienced God as his 'Father' in heaven, and that he also sent God's divine Spirit – or 'Holy Spirit' – to empower his Church. This view of a God, who was in some way three-in-one, was defined in later centuries by the Christian Church who called it the doctrine of the *Trinity*. (Or, more fully – the Trinity-in-Unity.)
- See also entry under **Christmas Gospel**.

XMAS

- **Christ** in the language of the New Testament starts with a single letter for *ch*, and it looks like an 'X'.
You may already be familiar with this usage of 'X' in the Christian symbol combining X and P – which are the first two letters of the word **Christ** in Greek.

The 'X' of XMAS is not therefore the 'X' which indicates that something is unknown, but the initial letter of the **Christ** through whom God made himself known.

- **-mas.**
The central service of Christians, when Christians eat and drink Bread and Wine together in remembrance of Jesus the **Christ** as he commanded them to do [Luke 22:19], has accumulated a number of names over the centuries: *Breaking of Bread, Eucharist, Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, and the Mass*.
- There is a Biblical basis for the first four, but not the *Mass*. This is still widely used by Roman Catholic Christians, and reflects the time when all services were in Latin. This unusual word derives simply from the words of dismissal – indeed the word dis-**miss**-al still has the root word at its centre.
- It is to do with being sent-out, and is a reminder that Christians leave worship sent-out by their Lord in **mission** to the world he came to save.