



St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas was a Bishop who lived in the fourth century AD in a place called Myra in Asia Minor (now called Turkey). He was a very rich man because his parents died when he was young and left him a lot of money. He was also a very kind man and had a reputation for helping the poor and giving secret gifts to people who needed it. There are several legends about St. Nicholas, although we don't know if any of them are true!

The most famous story about St. Nicholas tells how the custom of hanging up stockings to get presents in first started! It goes like this...

There was a poor man who had three daughters. He was so poor, he did not have enough money for a dowry, so his daughters couldn't get married. (A dowry is a sum of money paid to the bridegroom by the brides parents on the wedding day. This still happens in some countries, even today.) One night, Nicholas secretly dropped a bag of gold down the chimney and into the house (This meant that the oldest daughter was then able to be married.). The bag fell into a stocking that had been hung by the fire to dry! This was repeated later with the second daughter. Finally, determined to discover the person who had given him the money, the father secretly hid by the fire every evening until he caught Nicholas dropping in a bag of gold. Nicholas begged the man to not tell anyone what he had done, because he did not want to bring attention to himself. But soon the news got out and when anyone received a secret gift, it was thought that maybe it was from Nicholas.

Because of his kindness Nicholas was made a Saint. St. Nicholas is not only the saint of children but also of sailors! One story tells of him helping some sailors that were caught in a dreadful storm off the coast of Turkey. The storm was raging around them and all the men were terrified that their ship would sink beneath the giant waves. They prayed to St. Nicholas to help them. Suddenly, he was standing on the deck before them. He ordered the sea to be calm, the storm died away, and they were able to sail their ship safely to port.

St. Nicholas was exiled from Myra and later put in prison during the persecution by the Emperor Diocletian. No one is really knows when he died, but it was on 6th December in either 345 or 352 AD. In 1807, his bones were stolen from Turkey by some Italian merchant sailors. The bones are now kept in the Church named after him in the Italian port of Bari. On St. Nicholas feast day (6th December), the sailors of Bari still carry his statue from the Cathedral out to sea, so that he can bless the waters and so give them safe voyages throughout the year.

In the 16th Century in Europe, the stories and traditions about St. Nicholas became very unpopular.

But someone had to deliver presents to children at Christmas, so in the U.K., he became 'Father Christmas', a character from old children's stories; in France, he was then known as 'Père Noël'; in Germany, the 'Christ Kind'. In the early U.S.A. his name was 'Kris Kringle'. Later, Dutch settlers in the USA took the old stories of St. Nicholas with them and Kris Kringle became 'Sinterklass' or as we now say 'Santa Claus'!

Many countries, especially ones in Europe, celebrate St. Nicholas Day on 6th December. In Holland and some other European Countries, children leave clogs or shoes out to be filled with presents. They also believe that if they leave some hay and carrots in their shoes for Sinterklaas's horse, they will be left some sweets.

St. Nicholas became popular again in the Victorian era when writers, poets and artists rediscovered the old stories.

In 1823 the famous poem 'A Visit from St. Nicholas' or 'Twas the Night before Christmas', was published. Dr Clement Clarke Moore later claimed that he had written it for his children. However, some scholars now believe that it was actually written by Henry Livingston, Jr., who was a distant relative of Dr Moore's wife. The poem describes eight reindeer and gives them their names. They became really well known in the song 'Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer', written in 1949.

The UK Father Christmas and the American Santa Claus became more and more alike over the years and are now one and the same.

Some people say that Santa lives at the North Pole. In Finland, they say that he lives in the north part of their country called Lapland. But everyone agrees that he travels through the sky on a sledge that is pulled by reindeer, that he comes into houses down the chimney at night and places presents for the children in socks or bags by their beds, in front of the family Christmas tree, or by the fire place.

Most children receive their presents on Christmas Eve night or early Christmas morning, but in some countries they get their presents on St. Nicholas Day, December 6th.

St. Nicholas putting the bag of gold into a stocking is probably where the custom of having a tangerine or satsuma at the bottom of your Christmas stocking came from. If people couldn't afford gold, some golden fruit was a good replacement - and until the last 50 years these were quite unusual fruits and so still special!

There's a Christmas Urban Legend that says that Santa's red suit was designed by Coca-Cola and that they might even 'own' Santa! This is definitely NOT TRUE! Long before coke had been invented, St Nicholas had worn his Bishop's red robes. During Victorian times, he wore a range of colours (red, green, blue and brown fur) but red was always his favourite!

In January 1863 the magazine Harper's Weekly published the first illustration of St Nicholas/St Nick by Thomas Nast. In this he was wearing a 'Stars and Stripes' outfit! Over the next 20 years Thomas Nast continued to draw Santa every Christmas and his works were very popular indeed (he must have been very good friends with Santa to get such good access!).

This is when Santa really started to develop his big tummy and the style of red and white outfit he wears today. Nast designed Santa's look on some historical information about Santa and the poem 'A Visit from St. Nicholas'. On January 1st 1881, Harper's Weekly published Nast's most famous image of Santa, complete with a big red belly, an arm full of toys and smoking a pipe! This image of Santa became very popular with more artists drawing Santa in his red and white costume from 1900 to 1930.

By 1931, when Coke first used Santa in their advertising, his image was well established. The first 'Coke Santa' was drawn by artist Haddon Sundblom. He took the idea of Nast's Santa but made him even more larger than life and jolly, replaced the pipe with a bottle of Coke and created the famous Coke holding Santa!

Coca-Cola also agree that the red suit was made popular by Thomas Nast not them!