

**Christmas** or **Christmas Day** is a [holiday](#) that marks the birth of [Jesus](#), the central figure of [Christianity](#). Aspects of celebration may include gift-giving, [Christmas trees](#), display of [Nativity sets](#), [church](#) attendance, the [Father Christmas/Santa Claus](#) myth, and family gatherings. Churches using the [Gregorian calendar](#) observe the holiday on [December 25](#). Some [Eastern Orthodox Churches](#) celebrate on December 25 by the [Julian calendar](#), which currently corresponds to [January 7](#) on the [Gregorian calendar](#). These dates are merely traditional; the great majority of scholars agree that the actual birthdate of Jesus is unknown.

The word *Christmas* is derived from [Middle English](#) *Christemasse* and from [Old English](#) *Cristes mæsse*.<sup>[1]</sup> It is a contraction meaning "[Christ's mass](#)". The name of the holiday is often shortened to [Xmas](#) because Roman letter "X" resembles the [Greek](#) letter [X](#) (chi), an abbreviation for Christ (Χριστός).

In Western countries, Christmas is the most economically significant holiday of the year, and is even celebrated by non-Christians. The popularity of Christmas can be traced in part to its status as a winter festival. Many cultures have their most important holiday in winter because there is less agricultural work to do at this time. Examples of winter festivals that are believed by some to have influenced Christmas include the pre-Christian festivals of [Yule](#) and [Saturnalia](#), and many of the traditions associated with the holiday have origins in these pagan winter celebrations.

In [Western culture](#), the holiday is characterized by the exchange of gifts among friends and family members, some of the gifts being attributed to [Santa Claus](#) (also known as [Father Christmas](#), [Saint Nicholas](#), [Saint Basil](#) and [Father Frost](#)). However, various local and regional Christmas traditions are still practiced, despite the widespread influence of [American](#), [British](#) and [Australian](#) Christmas motifs disseminated by film, popular literature, television, and other media.

## **Santa Claus and other bringers of gifts**

Gift-giving is a near-universal part of Christmas celebrations. The concept of a mythical figure who brings gifts to children derives from [Saint Nicholas](#), a [bishop](#) of [Myra](#) in [fourth century](#) Lycia, [Asia Minor](#). He made a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine in his youth and soon thereafter became Bishop of Myra. He was imprisoned during the persecution of [Diocletian](#) and released after the accession of [Constantine](#). He may have been present at the [Council of Nicaea](#), though there is no record of his attendance. He died on [December 6](#) in 345 or 352. In 1087, Italian merchants stole his body at Myra and brought it to [Bari](#) in Italy. His relics are preserved in the church of San Nicola in Bari. An oily substance known as Manna di S. Nicola, which is highly valued for its medicinal powers, is said to flow from his relics.<sup>[18]</sup>

The [Dutch](#) recognized a [Saint Nicholas](#), or [Sinterklaas](#), who gave gifts on the eve of his feast day of [December 6](#). He became associated with Christmas in 19th century America and was renamed Santa Claus or [Saint Nick](#). In the Anglo-American tradition, this jovial fellow arrives on Christmas Eve on a [sleigh](#) pulled by [reindeer](#), and lands on the roofs of houses. He then climbs down the [chimney](#), leaves gifts for the children, and eats the food they leave for him. He spends the rest of the year making toys and keeping lists on the behaviour of the children.

One belief in the United Kingdom, United States, and other countries passed down through the generations is the idea of lists of good children and bad children. Throughout the year, Santa supposedly adds names of children to either the good or bad list depending on their behaviour.

When it gets closer to Christmas time, parents use the belief to encourage children to behave well. Those who are on the bad list receive a [booby prize](#), such as a piece of coal or a [switch](#) with which their parents beat them, rather than presents.

The [French](#) equivalent of Santa, [Père Noël](#), evolved along similar lines, eventually adopting the Santa image. In some cultures Santa Claus is accompanied by [Knecht Ruprecht](#), or [Black Peter](#). In other versions, [elves](#) make the holiday toys. His wife is referred to as [Mrs. Claus](#). Many [shopping malls](#) in [North America](#), the United Kingdom, and [Australia](#) have a Santa Claus children can visit to ask for presents.

The current tradition in several [Latin American](#) countries (such as [Venezuela](#)) holds that while Santa makes the toys, he then gives them to the [Baby Jesus](#), who is the one who actually delivers them to the children's homes. This story is meant to be a reconciliation between traditional religious beliefs and modern day [globalization](#), most notably the iconography of Santa Claus imported from the United States.

In many countries, children leave empty containers for Santa to fill with small gifts such as toys, candy, or fruit. In the United Kingdom, the United States, and [Canada](#) children hang a [Christmas stocking](#) by the fireplace on Christmas Eve because Santa is said to come down the chimney the night before Christmas to fill them. In other countries, children put their empty shoes out for Santa to fill on the night before Christmas, or for Saint Nicholas to fill on [December 5](#), the eve of his saint's day. Family members and friends also bestow gifts on each other.

## Timing of gifts

In the [Netherlands](#), [Saint Nicholas's Day](#) remains the principal day for gift giving while Christmas Day is a more religious holiday. In much of [Germany](#), children put shoes out on window sills on the night of [December 5](#), and find them filled with [candy](#) and small gifts the next morning. In Hungary, Santa Claus ([Hungarian](#): Mikulás) or for non-religious people Father Winter ([Hungarian](#): Télapó) is often accompanied by a black creature called Krampusz. The main day for gift giving in Germany is [December 24](#), when gifts are brought by Santa Claus or are placed under the Christmas tree. It is the same in [Hungary](#), except that the Christmas gifts are usually brought by little (child) [Jesus](#) ([Hungarian](#): Jézuska), not by Santa Claus. In [Spain](#), gifts are brought by the [magi](#) on Epiphany (January 6), although the tradition of leaving gifts under the Christmas Tree on [Christmas Eve](#) ([December 24](#)) for the children to find and open the following morning has been widely adopted as well. In [Poland](#), Santa Claus ([Polish](#): Święty Mikołaj) gives gifts on two occasions: on the night of [December 5](#) (so that children find them on the morning of [December 6](#)) and on [Christmas Eve](#), (so that children find gifts that same day). In [Finland](#), [Joulupukki](#) personally meets children and gives gifts on [December 24](#). In [Russia](#), [Grandfather Frost](#) brings presents on New Year's Eve, and these are opened on the same night. In [Scotland](#), presents were traditionally given on [Hogmanay](#), which is [New Year's Eve](#), but many Scots - especially since the establishment of Christmas Day as a legal holiday in [1967](#) - have adopted the English tradition of exchanging gifts on Christmas morning.

The song "[Twelve Days of Christmas](#)", celebrates an old English tradition of gifts each day from Christmas to Epiphany. In most of the world, Christmas gifts are given at night on Christmas Eve or in the morning of Christmas Day. Until recently, the British gave gifts to non-family members on [Boxing Day](#).

## Origin of holiday

Although no one knows on which date Jesus was born, Christians have favored December 25 since ancient times. It is the date on which the Romans marked the [winter solstice](#) and it is nine months following the Festival of [Annunciation](#) (March 25). In ancient and early Medieval times, Christmas was either a minor feast, or not celebrated at all.

Around 220, the theologian [Tertullian](#) declared that [Jesus](#) died on March 25, AD 29. Although this is not a plausible date for the [crucifixion](#), it does suggest that March 25 had significance for the church even before it was used as a basis to calculate Christmas. Modern scholars favor a [crucifixion](#) date of [April 3](#), AD 33 (also the date of a partial lunar eclipse).[2] (These are [Julian calendar](#) dates. Subtract two days for a [Gregorian](#) date.)

By 240, a list of significant events was being assigned to [March 25](#), partly because it was believed to be the date of the [vernal equinox](#). These events include creation, the fall of [Adam](#), and, most relevantly, the Incarnation.[3] The view that the Incarnation occurred on the same date as [crucifixion](#) is consistent with a Jewish belief that prophets died at an "integral age," either an anniversary of their birth or of their conception.[4][5]

Aside from being nine months later than [Annunciation](#), December 25 is also the date the Romans marked the [winter solstice](#), which they referred to as *bruma*. For this reason, some have suggested the opposite of the theory outlined above, i.e. that the date of Christmas was chosen to be the same as that of the solstice and that the date of Annunciation was calculated on this basis. (The [Julian calendar](#) was originally only one day off, with the solstice falling on [December 24](#) in 45 BC. Due to calendar slippage, the date of the astronomical solstice has moved back so that it now falls on either [December 21](#) or [December 22](#)).

The idea that December 25 is Jesus' birthday was popularized by [Sextus Julius Africanus](#) in *Chronographiai* (AD 221), an early reference book for Christians. This identification did not at first inspire feasting or celebration. In 245, the theologian [Origen](#) denounced the idea of celebrating the birthday of Jesus "as if he were a king pharaoh." Only sinners, not saints, celebrate their birthdays, Origen contended.

In 274, Emperor [Aurelian](#) designated December 25 as the festival of [Sol Invictus](#) (the "unconquered sun"). Aurelian may have chosen this date because the solstice was considered the birthday of [Mithras](#), a [syncretic](#) god of Persian origin. Mithras is often identified with Sol Invictus, although Sol was originally a separate Syrian god.

Mithras was a god of light and a child of the earth who sprang up next to a sacred stream. He was born bearing a torch and armed with a knife. Sundays were dedicated to Mithras and caves were often used for his worship. A series of emperors promoted Mithraism beginning with [Commodus](#). The cult emphasized loyalty to the emperor and Roman soldiers were expected to participate. Mithraism collapsed rapidly after [Constantine I](#) withdrew imperial favor (312), despite being at the peak of its popularity only a few years earlier.

As Constantine ended persecution, Christians began to debate the [nature of Christ](#). The Alexandrian school argued that he was the divine word made flesh (see [John 1:14](#)), while the [Antioch school](#) held that he was born human and infused with the Holy Spirit at the time of his baptism (see [Mark 1:9-11](#)). A feast celebrating Christ's birth gave the church an opportunity to promote the intermediate view that Christ was divine from the time of his incarnation.[6] [Mary](#), a minor figure for early Christians, gained prominence as the [theotokos](#), or god-bearer. There were Christmas celebrations in Rome as early as 336. December 25 was added to the calendar as a feast day in 350.[6]

Noël, (vers [1112](#)) est issu par évolution phonétique (*nael*) et modification vocalique du latin *natalis* (relatif à la naissance). L'"o" de Noël vient de la dissimilation des deux "a" de *natalis* et le [tréma](#) ([1718](#)) note la diérèse.

Dans l'usage actuel c'est un mot masculin qui devient féminin dans la locution elliptique *la [Fête de] Noël*. Aux XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle et [XV<sup>e</sup> siècles](#), « Noël ! » était un cri de réjouissance (équivalent à « Hourra ! ») que poussait le peuple pour saluer un évènement heureux. Un *noël* désigne également un cantique que l'on chante au moment de Noël.

## Antériorité

Bien avant le [christianisme](#), l'époque du [solstice](#) d'hiver était une période charnière de l'année, qui regroupait de nombreuses croyances relatives à la fertilité, la procréation et à l'astronomie. Elle donnait donc lieu à de nombreuses manifestations. Mais à part la fête chrétienne, aucune des fêtes décrites ci-après n'a porté le nom de « Noël », même si certaines croyances pré-chrétiennes ont continué à être pratiquées au moment de Noël après l'apparition du mot.

Les peuples [préhistoriques](#) adoraient la lumière et ils avaient construit des temples qui aidaient à comprendre l'arrivée des saisons pour les premiers agriculteurs européens, les hommes du [néolithique](#). Dans le temple [mégolithique](#) de [Newgrange](#) en Irlande, la lumière du soleil ne rentre que le jour du solstice d'hiver. Les [Celtés](#) faisaient de grands feux aux solstices pour lutter contre les ténèbres. Ils avaient très peur de ces périodes sombres avec le jour plus court mais en même temps, ils savaient que le soleil allait réchauffer le sol et les plantes.

La déesse égyptienne [Isis](#) est souvent représentée accroupie tenant dans son giron l'enfant [Horus](#). Certains y voient une préfiguration de la [Vierge Marie](#), tenant sur ses genoux l'enfant Jésus.

La fête juive de [Hanoucca](#), qui commémore la réinauguration du [Temple de Jérusalem](#) profané par les Grecs, a été fixée au 25 du neuvième mois lunaire, nommé "Kislev", au voisinage du solstice d'hiver. Le premier Livre des [Macchabées](#), conservé par le [canon](#) chrétien, insiste sur l'importance de cette date et de cette célébration.

Les Romains fêtaient les [Saturnales](#): du 17 au 24 décembre, les hommes et les femmes portaient alors des guirlandes autour du cou et s'offraient toutes sortes de cadeaux. Le [calendrier julien](#), réformé par Jules César, cherche à stabiliser l'[équinoxe](#) de printemps au 25 mars et le [solstice](#) d'hiver au 25 décembre. Sous l'empire romain, le 25 décembre devint la fête du "soleil vaincu" avec une des divinités solaires représentée par un enfant nouveau-né.

Quand [Jules César](#) créa le [calendrier julien](#), le solstice d'hiver fut fixé au 25 décembre. Mais la légère erreur du calendrier julien fit progressivement avancer solstices et équinoxes : au moment du [Concile de Nicée](#), le solstice tombait le 21 décembre, mais la Fête de la Nativité fut maintenue au 25 décembre, neuf mois après l'Incarnation, le 25 Mars. En 354, le 25 décembre devint ainsi la date de la naissance de Jésus Christ, le 1er janvier, huit jours après la Nativité, la date de la [Circconcision](#) et le 2 février, quarante jours après Noël, celle de la Purification de la Vierge ([Chandeleur](#)). En 1582, le [calendrier grégorien](#) remit le solstice, qui avait continué d'avancer jusqu'au 11 décembre, au 21 décembre, pour respecter les décisions du Concile de Nicée et la réalité des saisons.