

## Sermon Feast of St Nicholas

Many years ago, I conducted a formal sit down interview with my girls around the kitchen table. And the interview went something like this: “Girls, what do you know about Santa Claus?” And they responded, “he brings presents to good boys and girls.” “Well, what about the bad ones?” I asked. “They don’t get anything” they both replied. And then Gracie asks me, “Daddy, have I been good?” So I told her ... “depends on the day.”

Then I asked, “what does Santa look like?” They said, he has a long white beard, he likes the colour red, and he’s like 90 years old. So then I asked, “where does he live?” “Usually he lives at the North Pole” they said, “but right now he lives in stores, so he can do shopping, and he can meet girls and boys, and he has to buy a present for Mrs. Claus.”

Now for several years after that interview, the girls and I lived with this ‘don’t ask, don’t tell,’ policy. They didn’t ask about the logistics of Santa Claus, and I didn’t ask them if they still believed.

You see, there were certain assumptions about Santa Claus that seemed to hang in the air around our house on Christmas Eve. Stockings were laid out on our couches. And a plate of homemade cookies and a glass of milk was placed on the piano bench for Santa, along with a few carrots for the reindeer.

And come Christmas morning, Santa has filled the stockings with gifts, and fuelled up on cookies and milk, and we just assumed that the reindeer liked the carrots because they had disappeared too. And for years I lived in fear of the day that they would start asking me the serious questions about Santa Claus. Because I didn’t know how I was going to answer those questions.

Like, on the one hand, we all want to be truthful with our children. But on the other hand, we know in our very bones, the power and magic of Santa Claus. And we are loathe to see that childlike sense of awe and wonder diminished in our children. We actually are the ones who want them to hang on to the magic for as long as possible.

And so we have brought on board NORAD to track Santa Claus. Canada Post to handle his mail, Elf on the Shelf to figure out who’s naughty or nice, and we have even developed the Santa Spy Cam app for your mobile devices.

Believing is seeing ... Well, believing in Santa Claus is one of the very few myths we have retained in our post-modern society. And the deeper we get into this, I think one of the reasons why we’ve retained it for over a thousand years, is because the man behind the myth that lies at the heart of our Santa Claus traditions, was such a powerful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, that every generation that has followed, has been inspired by his simple kindness and generosity. That person, of course, is St. Nicholas.



Now it takes a Dutchman to explain how we went from St. Nicholas to Santa Claus, but I think the short version is that in the Netherlands, people refer to St. Nicholas as Sint-ter Cholas or Sint-ter Claus, which we've later anglicized as Santa Claus.

So St. Nicholas was born around the year 270 in the city of Patara, which lies along the southern coast of Turkey. He was orphaned very early in life, his parents Epiphanius and Johanna dying of the plague. And so his uncle John took Nicholas in, and raised him until he was old enough to study at a nearby Christian boarding school.

And while he was at the boarding school, Nicholas was assigned to assist the elderly Bishop in his work with the poor, by distributing food and clothing to countless families who were struggled for survival. Now Nicholas' parents had been well-off, his father had owned a fishing fleet, and so Nicholas continued their practice of helping the less

fortunate by using his sizeable inheritance to help those in need.

He became especially well known for his care and sensitivity to the needs of children. And often, after visiting a family during the day, he would return silently at night, leaving clothing and other necessities for their children in a conspicuous place.

Then at the death of the old bishop, the elders of the church gathered together and elected Nicholas as their new leader. He was only 30 years old, and in humility, he insisted on being called Father Nicholas instead of Bishop Nicholas.



But being bishop allowed Nicholas the privilege of having a horse to travel across his Diocese, visiting families and churches. He named his white horse “North Star” after the star which guided travellers home.

And in spite of his new duties as bishop, Nicholas continued his habit of giving secret gifts to the children of poor families late at night, usually leaving the presents on doorsteps or windowsills.

He commissioned local weavers, bakers, and carvers to supply sacks full of toys, clothing, and cakes, which he would distribute to the poor that he had visited during the day. And he dressed in a heavy coat and hat, and he let his beard grow long to protect himself from the cold night air.

The most famous story of his giving concerns his generosity towards three daughters of a very poor man. Now during this time, parents arranged marriages for their children. And in order to attract a worthy husband for a daughter, a father had to offer a dowry. The theory was that the more generous the dowry, the better quality of the husband.

But this poor man had three daughters and not a penny to give them. Unfortunately,

this meant that he would have to put them out on the streets, where they would have to sell themselves as slaves or prostitutes.

But then Nicholas heard about the situation, and one night, he crept quietly outside the poor man’s home and threw a bag of gold in through an open window. This gold became the dowry for the oldest daughter. The following night, Nicholas crept by again and threw a second bag of gold in through an open window, and that became the dowry for the middle daughter.



Cornelis de Vos (1584 - 1651)  
*The Charity of Saint Nicholas*  
 Museum Amstelkring, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

By this time, the grateful father was determined to find out who this anonymous benefactor was. So he kept watch, but Nicholas, not wanting to be discovered, climbed on the roof of the house and dropped his third bag of gold down the chimney where it landed in a stocking hung by the chimney to dry. However, the father ran outside and caught Nicholas on the roof, and news of his generosity quickly spread. From then on, whenever anyone received an unexpected gift from a secret source, they thanked Nicholas.

But then in the year 303, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered a brutal persecution of all Christians. Anyone suspected of being a Christian was ordered to sacrifice to pagan gods. Nicholas and thousands of others refused and were dragged away to be tortured.

When the Romans found out Nicholas was a bishop, they worked him over pretty hard. They beat him repeatedly, trying to get him to reveal the names of other Christians and the location of the church's hidden copies of scripture. However, Nicholas refused to break under their tortures, and finally, after years of imprisonment, Nicholas was freed by decree of the new Emperor Constantine.

Then in the year 325, Constantine summoned all 319 bishops of the church to meet at the city of Nicea for a grand council. At issue was the question of the Trinity; specifically whether or not Jesus Christ is co-eternal with God the Father. This was a

heated and acrimonious debate which divided the house of bishops into two factions ... which somehow seems reminiscent of our own parliament.



Anyways, there were some delegates, led by Arius who insisted that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father. That is, they believed that God the Father created Jesus at some fixed point in history, and as such, Jesus was made of a different substance than that of God the Father – that he was *homoiousia* in Greek.

There were others, however, led by Athanasius, who insisted that Jesus was, in fact, God in human flesh, that he is *homoousia* – co-eternal with the Father and made of the same substance. Now just as an aside, if you’ve ever heard of the saying, “not one iota more”. That saying originated during this debate because the difference between *homoousia* and *homoiousia* is the letter *i*, which in Greek language is known as *iota*.

Now Arius was a clever orator and forcefully argued his position at length – he even made up little jingles so his fellow bishops could sing along. But the longer Arius argued, the more agitated Nicholas got. Until finally, Nicholas couldn’t take it any more. He got up, crossed the room, and punched Arius right in the face. His fellow bishops were appalled, and they almost kicked Nicholas out of the conference, but Emperor Constantine allowed him to apologize and stay.

Anyways, the result of the debate was clear-cut, unlike what Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci code* claimed. The vote was 317 to 2 in favour of God the Father and Jesus Christ being co-eternal and made of the same substance.

And then, Nicholas actually helped draft the Nicean council's concluding statement, which we now know as the Nicene Creed – the creed that we still say every Sunday. The creed that is so clear about who Jesus is: God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made.



Now after Nicea, Nicholas returned to Myra where he remained bishop and served his people until his death on December 6<sup>th</sup> in the year 343. The church immediately made Nicholas a saint, and the practice of gift giving to children on his feast day, or Christmas day, has continued ever since.

And though the modern view of Santa Claus with his magical sleigh and round the world tour on Christmas Eve, eventually overwhelmed the simple truth of Nicholas' goodness and generosity, I have found some consolation and comfort this week in learning about the man behind the myth.

Because too often the Santa that we meet in our shopping malls, is so emasculated as to be irrelevant. He's like a cosmic

sugar daddy with a certain fickleness surrounding who's naughty and who's nice. Yet the man behind the myth is significantly different.

Unlike our modern view of Santa, St. Nicholas didn't just work one day a year. He worked every day of the year with the poor. Nicholas didn't give charity just during the holidays, but for him, giving was a way of life. Nicholas didn't just sit in the marketplace waiting to meet boys and girls. He lived and served his people, he knew their names, and they knew that they could come to Nicholas for help at any time.

Nicholas acted on the gospel message and lived out his faith in a very practical way. For him, loving your neighbour meant responding to the needs of others, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and standing up for the disenfranchised of society.

In fact, one day Nicholas was called before the governor and ordered to produce the treasures of the church. The governor felt threatened by the growing Christian church, and he wanted a piece of the wealth that he believed the Christians must possess.

Nicholas said that the church had no gold or jewels or other valuables. But the governor didn't believe him and was insistent, demanding that the riches of the church be brought before him the next morning.

So next day, Nicholas appeared at the governor's doorway. He was empty-handed. "I told you to bring me the treasures of the church!" the governor shouted. Nicholas then invited to governor to look outside, and gathered together, peering sheepishly at the great doors to the governor's palace was a mass of beggars, cripples, slaves and outcasts. "These," said Nicholas, "are the treasures of the church."

Likewise, our treasures are not found in gold or jewels or gifts under the tree on Christmas morning, but in the opportunities we have to love our neighbours, and to show generosity to those in need.

St. Nicholas invites us into a life of self-giving and secret-giving. He is a spiritual leader of steadfast faith, whose wisdom is found in clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, protecting the helpless, promoting justice, and giving in such a way that "the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing."

So whenever you see Santa Claus this season, or if you are faced with those inevitable questions from a child, I would invite you to consider sharing with them about the man behind the myth, who so capably points us towards the gift of the Christ child, and gives us a model for generous and compassionate Christian service. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



*St. Nicholas Giving Alms* by Jan Heinsch  
Gallery of Modern Art, Roudnice nad Labem, Czech Republic