

Christmas is not about the presents but about the presence of Jesus!

A Christmas song this week got stuck in my head – There's something about Christmas Time – and I think there is. Christmas is my favourite time of the year. Despite the build up I love getting up in the morning and feeling excited about the day ahead. The day with family and eating too much food and then settling down to watch the Queen's message to see if this is the year she is retiring. Of course presents are involved but I enjoy giving the presents.

So why do we do presents then?

In many different homes it is done differently.

In my home growing up Mum would hang the stockings on the Fire Guard in front of the open fire, so our stockings were hung, just like in 'The Night Before Christmas' book, then on Christmas Eve they would get moved to the end of the bed. This is my stocking and as you can see it is not all that big. Overnight it was filled with small presents, lollies and cherries from Santa. These were the presents my brother and I were allowed to open before everyone else got up and the presents under the tree shared. This usually didn't happen until after church or until my Grandma arrived. This is the tradition I have continued with my girls, Jade has a part stocking that was my project when I had a year off when Chelsea was born, and Chelsea usually has my stocking. The main thing I have emphasised to the girls is that giving to one another is important.

However in Darren's house they had a pillow case that was filled with presents. This was located 'under' the Christmas Tree. This tradition has morphed into a large santa sack each beside the tree given to the girls by their grandparents.

These differences in our households has lead me to think about why we have the stocking, what other cultures do and how does it all link to Jesus being a Baby in a Manger.

The Stocking Tradition

In a legend, St. Nicholas of Myra, believed to be the inspiration for Santa Claus, is traveling through a small village when he learns of the plight of a merchant and his daughters. The once wealthy merchant has fallen on difficult times and is worried for the future of his three beautiful daughters. Unable to afford dowries ~ money or property brought by a wife to her husband at marriage ~ for the girls, the three young women have no prospects for wedlock and may be subject to lives of shame.

Upon hearing of this predicament, St. Nicholas set forth to secretly help the proud merchant, knowing he would not accept an outright gift of charity. Riding his majestic white horse by the merchant's house one night, St. Nicholas tossed three bags of gold coins down the home's chimney. The bags were fortuitously captured in the girls' stockings, which had

been hung by the fireplace mantle to dry. When the gold coins were discovered the next morning, the merchant and his daughters rejoiced. The young women went on to make advantageous marriages and all lived happily ever after. After tellings of the account spread, children began hanging their stockings by the fireplace, in hopes that they too would receive gifts from St. Nicholas.

Another explanation for the tradition of Christmas stockings may be found in Dutch lore. In Holland, 'Sinterklaas' arrives on a ship from Spain with his assistant 'Zwarte Piet' or Black Pete. Upon disembarking, they travel the country with Sinterklaas upon his noble white steed and Zwarte Piet riding a mule. Dutch children would leave treats of carrots and hay in their clogs for the horse and mule and Sinterklaas would in turn fill the shoes with small gifts for the children after the horse and mule had enjoyed the treats.

When Dutch settlers immigrated to America, they brought many of their traditions with them. Over time, Sinterklaas came to be known as Santa Claus, and it is quite possible that wooden clogs were eventually replaced by stockings.

In any event, the habit of hanging of Christmas stockings, with the expectation they will be filled with small gifts from Santa, is a tradition now enjoyed by countless children the world over.

So does all this present giving come back to Jesus?

In Matthew 2:1-12

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"^[b]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The three kings bring presents to Jesus. These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world: Gold as a precious metal, Frankincense as perfume or incense, and Myrrh as anointing oil. All of these very expensive gifts to the Son of God who because of his Presence gives all of us a present – everlasting life. However like any present it needs to be opened. You can receive a present and leave it sitting in the corner and you don't know what is inside until you open it. So at Christmas we are celebrating God's ultimate present (the birth of Jesus) to us and once received you can live in his presence.