

St. Nicholas 6th December 2023 Linda E Hunter

This morning, 6th December, is traditionally known as the feast of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was born round about the year 280 in Patara, Lycia, an area which is now part of present-day Turkey. There is little know about his life but apparently both his parents died when he was a young man, so on receiving his inheritance he used it help the poor and sick in the area where he lived. Nicholas was a devout Christian and later became Bishop of Myra. He was a bishop who helped the needy.

As with many Christian saints, St. Nicholas of is the patron saint of a particular group. Most notably, he is a patron saint of children and sailors

There are many tales and legends about him, many involving the number 3. One story tells how he helped three poor sisters. Their father did not have enough money to pay their dowries and thought of selling them into servitude. Nicholas was reputed to have given 3 purses of gold to them for their marriage dowries to save them from this difficult situation. It is said that he threw the money through the family's window, which landed in their shoes, which were drying near their fireplace. The symbol of gold coins in three purses became the symbol of pawnshop. In the 1300s, people in poverty met caring friars when they entered the doors of pawnshops. The shops existed to help the poor get back on their feet. These friars had their best interests in mind.

There were 3 boys who, it is said, St. Nicholas raised from life after they were murdered in a brine tub by a butcher, another time he saved three unjustly condemned men from death and three sailors near the coast of Turkey.

Several sources state Saint Nicholas is believed to have died on December 6, 343. Over the years, stories of his miracles and work for the poor spread to other parts of the world. He became known as the protector of children and sailors and was associated with gift-giving. He was a popular saint in Europe until the time of the Reformation in the 1500s, a religious movement that led to the creation of Protestantism, which turned away from the practice of honouring saints.

In the European countries of Germany and Poland, boys have traditionally dressed as bishops and begged alms for the poor. In Poland and Ukraine children wait for St. Nicholas to come to put a present under their pillows provided that the children were good during the year. Children who behaved badly may expect to find a twig or piece of coal under their pillows. In the Netherlands and Belgium children put out a shoe filled with hay and a carrot for Saint Nicholas' horse. On Saint Nicholas Day, gifts are tagged with personal humorous rhymes written by the sender. In the United States, one custom associated with Saint Nicholas Day is children leaving their shoes in the foyer on Saint Nicholas Eve in hope that Saint Nicholas will place some coins on the soles.

Saint Nicholas, was, and still is an important figure in Holland. The Dutch continued to celebrate his feast day on December 6. Children put out their shoes the night before. In the morning, they discover the gifts that Saint Nicholas has left for them.

After his death, the legend of his gift-giving grew. Saint Nicholas transformed into the legendary character called Santa Claus, who brings Christmas presents to children around the world, or, as he is known in America Sinterklaas.

In the 11th century, Christian nuns in Belgium and France initiated the practice of giving the poor gifts in the name of Saint Nicholas. This custom spread to Germany and Holland further spreading the Feast of Saint Nicholas and its associated customs.

St. Nicholas found ways of helping others in secret so he did not embarrass the family at having to accept charity. Going out of your way to help someone in need might feel like a chore, but it's a true imitation of St. Nicholas, and is always worth the effort.

If we are not careful Christmas can become materialistic. It should be a time to consider people we can help, in our neighbourhoods, families, or across the globe. During this difficult time financially, many families are finding money doesn't go as far as it used to, and just feeding their family each week is difficult, Christmas places an extra strain on their finances, perhaps this is where we can help those in our locality. We have the ideal opportunity here in church to give items to the West Northumberland foodbank, but there are many other opportunities open to us if only we look for them. St. Nicholas looked after the poor particularly the children, we too should follow his example as we approach the Christmas season.