

## Something Different for Christmas 2024

December was our Christmas special with something a little different to our usual meeting. Adrienne Hasketh gave us an insight into Christmas traditions around the world and songs to sing along to.

Christmas was settled as December 25<sup>th</sup> in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The date fell in the middle of the pagan festival of Winter Solstice, so it seemed appropriate. There is actually no mention of any particular date or month in the bible.

The Christmas tradition of having a decorated tree started in the Germanic regions of Europe. It was the British royal family who were the first to take up decorating a fir tree in this country. The custom became more popular after Prince Albert married Queen Victoria and had a large tree put up in Windsor Castle, decorated in the German style. In 1848 a picture of the royal family around the tree was published in the cover of the Illustrated London News establishing the tradition even further. O Come All Ye Faithful was then sung. A traditional English carol, originality in Latin.

Father Christmas is a common figure in many countries, but probably started in The Netherlands with Sinterklas. He wore green and white. They celebrate Sinterklasday on December 6<sup>th</sup>. He is said to live in Spain and arrive in The Netherlands by boat. His companion Black Peter is said to be of Spanish Moors decent.

Italians start Christmas at the beginning of December. They put up a large Christmas tree in a public square in Rome. On December the 6<sup>th</sup> they have St. Nicholas Day for children. Based on St. Nicholas, an early Christian Bishop who was said to have been very generous. In Naples they make hand crafted crib scenes with very detailed designs that often date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Crib services for families on Christmas eve are very important, especially in Southern Italy.

In Greece small groups of children go carol singing on Christmas Eve from door to door. They are given small gifts of money, sweets or fruit. Traditionally Greeks decorated boats for Christmas. They now decorate miniature boats for the home and large illuminated boats can be seen in many cities and towns. Greek children get gifts from St. Basil on New Years Day. The next song we sang was I Saw Three Ships, another English carol, reflecting the tradition of boats being important in coastal regions.

In Spain the main Christmas meal is eaten on Christmas Eve. They eat suckling pig or lamb. Midnight Mass is a very important service for many. On Christmas day seafood is often eaten. Three Kings day or Epiphany is celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Children get gifts to symbolise when the three kings arrived and gave gifts to the baby Jesus. On New Years Eve they eat grapes at midnight, one for each stroke of the clock. If they manage to eat all twelve on each strike it is said to be good luck for the year ahead.

The French also go to Midnight Mass. After the service they eat their main Christmas feast. It has several courses and last long into the night. Traditionally a Yule Log was burned from Christmas Eve until New Years Eve. Foliage was added and a sprinkle of red wine for the aroma. These days an edible log is often used as a dinner table centre piece instead. Then we sang Ding, Dong, Merrily on High, which uses a French tune with English lyrics.

For Germans Advent is important, lighting up a wreath of candles on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. They still mostly put up real trees and decorate them gradually, finishing on Christmas Eve. They leave them up until the 12<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas. German children also have St. Nicholas day on the 6<sup>th</sup>. They leave out boots or shoes to be filled with treats. Germany is famous

for its Christmas markets, with some dating back as far as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. We sang Silent Night, an Austrian Carol with German lyrics.

Slovakia eat a multi course Christmas feast on Christmas Eve. They start with bread wafers that they bless. There is always a fish course and a thick meaty cabbage soup. With St Nicholas day on the 6<sup>th</sup>, on Christmas day gifts are left under the tree by the baby Jesus. The next song was Good King Wenceslas, based on the legend of a real Bohemian King, with Bohemia covering the modern day Czech lands including Slovakia.

In Norway they light a candle every night from Christmas Eve to New Years day. They celebrate Little Christmas Eve on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. They have a kind of hot rice pudding with sugar and cinnamon. An almond is placed in the pudding, and the one who gets it in their pudding wins a marzipan pig.

Iceland's Christmas Eve is celebrated with fermented skate. Christmas day is usually a lamb meal. They give each other books on Christmas Eve and often spend the evening reading.

St. Thomas day on December 21<sup>st</sup> marks the start of Christmas in Finland. The house is cleaned ready for Christmas and winter tasks are completed, before feasting. Jolupukki is the Finish Father Christmas, His name literally means Yule Goat, which hints at his Pagan origins. A goat creature bringing gifts, although these days he is more like a modern Fathers Christmas, retaining a few goat like features.

In the Ukraine they used to celebrate Christmas on January 7<sup>th</sup>, as part of the Orthodox church. However the date was officially changed to December 25<sup>th</sup> in 2023 to keep them separate from the Russian church. Ukrainians hang a sheaf of wheat in their homes to welcome nature and a bountiful harvest.

In Brazil the crib scene is important and they usually make one from clay. They are made up of the usual Bible characters, plus often many animals and scenery such as trees and mountains. Smaller versions are put inside the house and often much larger versions are put outside. At New Year they traditionally have fireworks and street parties. They wear white, a tradition inherited from African origins.

As a Catholic country Argentina celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8<sup>th</sup>. Many families set up the Nativity scene and Christmas tree on this date. Gifts are often opened after Midnight Mass.

Poinsettias were first popularised as a Christmas plant in the USA after being brought over from their native Mexico. Mexicans have clay nativity scenes. They traditionally sing lullabies to the baby Jesus. Here we sang We Three Kings, an American carol daiting from 1857.

As a non Christian country China celebrates Christmas as more of a young persons day, with friends going out together. On Christmas Eve they give loved ones an apple, decorated with a stencilled message on it and wrapped in pretty coloured papers.

In Singapore they put up Christmas lights on shopping streets. They have a Christmas Wonderland theme park full of shimmering light displays.

Both Australia and South Africa have summer Bar-be-cues for Christmas. In Australia they often Bar-be-cue on the beach. South Africans have a fire style bar-be-cue and gather around the fire long into the evening.

Lastly we sang God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, dating from 16<sup>th</sup> century England, it is the oldest carol still sung today.

We then enjoyed a small buffet and drinks, which helped put us even more in the Christmas spirit. The extended meeting then ended with a short Christmas themed quiz which made for a lot of fun.