

Christmas

What happens?

For the foreign observer it looks something like this. From October onwards shops and streets set up their decorative displays and lights. Gifts and party wear are heavily marketed in shop windows, catalogues and on TV. Supermarket shelves groan with displays of puddings, cakes and mince pies. Visitors may be particularly bemused by mincemeat and boxes of Christmas crackers. British acquaintances may ask 'What are you doing for Christmas?'

Children at local primary schools may be asked 'What will Father Christmas bring you?' while at the same time rehearsing for a Nativity play. This play might reflect the Bible story adequately but it might instead provide a sentimental take on a story of 'The Littlest Angel'. What is an international wife from China, three months into her stay in the UK, to make of the request to provide her son with a shepherd costume?

In the week leading up to Christmas visitors may be disgusted at the sight of pools of vomit on the pavement or drunken British workers making their way home following the workplace Christmas party. When Christmas Day itself comes everything shuts down. There are no shops open, no public transport and most if not all University staff go on leave. There are no street celebrations and it seems the only available activity (apart from academic work) is to watch TV.

And yet in homes and churches up and down the country we Christians are celebrating the most precious and profound mystery of the Incarnation.

Background

Before we think about sharing the message of Jesus' coming with our international friends, it's worth reflecting carefully on the nature of the complex cultural phenomenon which is the British* Christmas. Try doing an ideas association with the word 'Christmas' and see what you come up with. For me, apart from all the church related activities, it would include lists, shopping, baking mince pies, negotiations with extended family about visits, bumper editions of the Radio Times and school concerts - to name only a few! Christmas occupies the same cultural space in Britain as New Year celebrations do in many other cultures.

*NB much of what is described is far less true of Scotland, although in recent years it seems that the marking of Christmas in addition to New Year is growing north of the border.

A potted history of Christmas in Britain

A pagan Roman feast day was adopted by the Church officially in the 4th century as the time to celebrate the Nativity. As Christianity spread through Northern Europe other pagan customs from the Germanic midwinter feast of Yule were added to the mix. By the mediaeval era a composite festival of Christ's Mass was well established. Looking at today's secular revelries one can sympathise with the 17th century Puritan Parliament for banning the celebration of Christmas. Pagan customs were clearly prominent in what had evidently become a time of license and excess. The festival never fully recovered its major position in the calendar until well into the 19th century. In the 1840s, largely influenced by Charles Dickens and the Royal family, the Victorians reinvented Christmas as the family festival we know today. The Victorian ideal of a family gathering of fun, good cheer and goodwill to others still exerts a powerful effect on our society in

the way we think about the Christmas season. This is why charity appeals depicting need and suffering 'especially at Christmas' pack such an emotional punch. Living up to this happy family ideal is also a reason why so many in Britain today find Christmas so stressful.

Christmas customs

It is beyond the scope of this guide to deal with all the many Christmas customs and their origins, but here are some resources I have found helpful.

If you can find it in your local library, *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain: an encyclopaedia of living traditions*, by Charles Kightly (Thames and Hudson, ISBN 0-500-27537-8), now sadly out of print, provides a wealth of material about all kinds of customs. The passage on Christmas gives a good overview.

The Making of the Modern Christmas by Golby and Purdue (Sutton Publishing, ISBN 0-7509-2136-6) is an informative and scholarly work by two Open University academics. It is written in an enjoyable, popular style and is well illustrated. Excellent background reading for your understanding.

Horrible Christmas by Terry Deary (Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99798-4) is written in the same vein as the popular Horrible Histories series, aimed at upper primary school age children. It is nevertheless a brilliant source of Christmas facts and figures for the international student worker if you can cope with the corny jokes.

My *Lion Christmas Book*, compiled by Mary Batchelor, is now out of print but copies are still available from Amazon.co.uk (from secondary sellers).

www.christmasarchives.com also provides useful information on some customs (check out the chronology of Father Christmas, for example).

Christmas in church

For the church in pre-reformation Britain the main focus was the Christmas Eve midnight mass (as is still the case in Catholic countries). The service/festival of nine lessons and carols was later introduced as a Protestant alternative, focussing on word rather than sacrament. It is interesting that since the end of WWII the 'midnight communion' has again become widespread in Anglican churches, including evangelical ones.

Personal Preparation

Why in a guide about Christmas do I first major on the secular and pagan aspects of the festival when we want ideas about introducing the gospel? The reason is because much of it is in full view of our international friends and needs explanation. We need to be very clear in our own minds how to separate the Biblical teaching on the first coming of Jesus from all our cultural packaging. It's a principle vital for all cross cultural evangelism, but nowhere is the potential for mixed messages more apparent than in the Christmas festival which is understood by many as Christian. Santa and his elves are images increasingly known around the world, just like Coca Cola. My conviction is that we need to have an intelligent understanding of how this has come about in order to effectively communicate the gospel.

A Chinese friend once came with us to a Carols by Candlelight service. Throughout the service he kept whispering questions – why the candles, who is that person (it was the vicar) and why is he dressed like that? He was so overwhelmed by the totally unfamiliar but visually rich layers of British church culture that he was unable to engage with the gospel message that was present.

So, as you prepare for your Christmas themed social events, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I celebrate Christmas and why?
- Which parts derive from my Christian faith?
- Which have roots in ancient pagan custom?
- Which derive from the Victorians?
- What comes from film or literature?
- What is driven by commercial, social or family pressure?
- How can I best separate these strands out for my international friend to understand?

Even when we look at the Christmas story itself it is easy to make assumptions about what we know. We need to go back to the Biblical narrative and ask questions like:

- How many kings were there?
- Did Mary ride a donkey?
- Had snow *really* fallen, snow on snow?

Having said all that and done all our homework, it is *still* good to celebrate the birth of our Lord! Let's pray our international friends catch our enthusiasm for the precious message of Emmanuel, God with us.

Using Christmas for social events

The Christmas party with a talk

This is the occasion when a straight evangelistic talk from the Christmas story is natural and appropriate, particularly when your group has some members already studying the Bible and seeking. Have good food available, decorations and party games as appropriate for your group. It's a good idea to have a performance of a carol to listen to and calm everyone down before the talk.

Telling the story

Be careful not to make the assumption that your guests actually know the nativity story well! Asian and Middle Eastern students may only have hazy knowledge, if any, about the events so familiar to us. In this case a better option may be to simply tell the story in full and pose the question 'How will you respond to the coming of Jesus - like the Wise men or like King Herod?' with an invitation to come to join a Bible exploration group/attend a Visa course or similar. Crib scenes make a good visual aid. See if you can collect different styles from different parts of the world to make the point that the Christmas message is universal!

"We always use a Christingle as a visual aid to simply explain Christmas or Easter to our families. Sometimes the children make them as an activity at our Christmas party and we ensure each family takes one home. I find families who are here for more than one year frequently remember the meaning of the symbols from one Christmas to the next. We also sing the Christingle song and give them the words to take home."

See www.the-childrens-society.org.uk for the making and meaning of Christingles.

For some groups, it may be appropriate to get them reading the nativity accounts carefully and then acting them out – producing their own nativity sketches in other words.

Using Christian Art

One way of telling the story is to explore the many fine examples of Nativity scenes painted by the great masters of European art. If you have a knowledgeable enthusiast in your church arrange an illustrated talk about the Nativity in Western art, or organise a trip to the National (or other) Gallery. Make sure your enthusiast is well briefed to cater for the level of language and understanding of the audience. Even if you are not an expert, explaining one favourite painting can have equal impact. You may get some ideas from Neil MacGregor's book "Seeing Salvation, images of Christ in art" (BBC, ISBN 0-563-55111-9). Make use of reproductions on Christmas cards as a resource.

If you'd like to use Nativity art from other parts of the world, they are fairly easy to find on the Internet, for example, from this webpage <https://thejesusquestion.org/2011/12/25/nativity-paintings-from-around-the-world/>. The resource pack "The Jesus We Share" (ISBN GA202-ED-07), produced by the Church Mission Society, Methodist Publishing and USPG, and featuring images of Jesus in art from around the world, also includes a handful of nativity scenes.

Using Music

Opportunities abound here – choose what will work well for your setting:

Carol Services

Invite a group to a traditional 'Cathedral Choir' carol service if you have one near you. Although these services may seem more like a concert performance they have the advantage of high quality music which you haven't had to organise! Your own church's carol service is another obvious choice, but in both cases it would be good to organise some meeting (probably best before, with festive food!) where you can explain what is happening. A Cathedral service may well use the King James Version of the Bible and many of our traditional carols have quite archaic language. Consider reproducing annotated copies of all the readings/carols in advance if you can so that your friends can follow the service more easily.

Choirs

You may be able to invite those keen to sing to actually join your church choir – or a special international choir – for the Christmas services. They do not need to be Christians to take part. If the choir is largely international make sure that your music leader is aware of cultural issues and allow a longer time for rehearsals. Your team members can provide support.

Cultural talk

Explain the history of carols and illustrate with some good examples that will tell the story well. Play them on CD, explain the difficult words and teach one to the group. Instead of using a CD you could invite members of your church choir/music group to sing them live. This might introduce other members of your church to what you are doing with international students! Alternatively have them sing at an international Christmas party/dinner.

Christmas food and crafts

For creative types, organise an event around making decorations or festive food with explanations of their history. Mince pies or sweets such as peppermint creams can be easily demonstrated and made with a group. You could take a group on a country walk (or to the market) to find holly and ivy to be followed up with making table decorations. Tree decorations can be easily made in origami or salt dough! The key here is finding someone who loves to make things with their hands – they will usually have plenty of ideas of what is possible. This kind of event is best seen as a community and friendship building activity (but could include testimony, see below)

Using Literature

There may be some students in your group who are already interested in and knowledgeable of English literature. An evening of well chosen readings and poetry on a Christmas theme may be very attractive to those with a good command of English. TS Elliot's *Journey of the Magi* comes to mind. As with art and music, this kind of thing provides opportunities for discussing spiritual themes or simply telling the Christmas story.

Using games

No Christmas party would be complete without them, so see if you can include one which helps introduce a spiritual note, even if only obliquely. Pass the Parcel can be played at many different levels. It may be best simply as an enjoyable fight over who gets the chocolate, but if you think it could work for your group, include a 'forfeit' along with a sweet in each layer of paper. You could have these as a kind of Christmas quiz, or use questions from 'International Opinion'. See also the example below. There are word games suitable for EFL students which could be adapted to a Christmas theme. Try writing out the Christmas story in simple language with missing gaps to fill in, or use a Christmas word search. Take Christmas customs from around the world and match them with the correct country. You could also take a Christmas text such as John 1:14 or Luke 2:11 and write it out in different languages for people to guess.

"A few years ago a small group from our church told the Christmas story to international students using a Pass the Parcel game. As each layer was unwrapped, as well as a sweet or something similar, there was a figure from a nativity set. There followed a brief explanation about that figure. Some figures also had a related carol/song, and someone did a dramatic monologue as one of the shepherds recounting what he saw and experienced. It went down really well."

Explaining customs

Many of the above ideas could be incorporated into one cultural talk giving the history of the festival (as I did at the beginning) with a brief background to different customs. You could bill the talk "Is Christmas a Christian festival?" Most of course will assume yes, but a frank explanation of all the other aspects will naturally lead to discussions about faith and practice in both our society and theirs.

Using Testimony

With such a wealth of material available and perhaps only one event at which to introduce it to our international friends, one effective approach is tackling it personally. Explain what *you* do at Christmas. By all means include all the cultural trimmings, explaining where they come from – but

emphasise *why* you are celebrating and what that means to you. No one can take away your personal testimony. This may also be a good way of using your invited experts (see above). Your craft/cooking enthusiast can demonstrate how to make mince pies but also explain simply what Christmas means for them.

A Christmas Weekend Away

If you're able to organise a weekend away any time in December, it can have a Christmas theme and feature many of the elements above. It's something very special for international students to experience together, especially if it features things like, cosy fires, decorations, making Christmas cake together, going for a walk in the cold and coming back to hot drinks, etc. Taking time to sing carols together and hear a couple of Christmas messages would feel natural too.