

## Christmas through the ages

It's Christmas! Merry Christmas to you all. Christmas is the second most important Christian festival, after Easter. I thought I would celebrate the season by sharing with you some interesting Christmas facts that you might not have known.

The first concerns the song 'Jingle Bells', probably one of the best known Christmas songs. But it is a very odd one. It is the only Christmas song that doesn't mention Christmas, Jesus or the Nativity. That's because it was originally written by an American with a very different festival in mind – it was written to celebrate Thanksgiving.

'Jingle Bells' was also the first tune played live in space. On 16 December 1965, as US astronauts Wally Schirra and Tom Stafford were preparing to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere in Gemini VI, Stafford scared the life out of Mission Control by calling in to report a UFO. He said, 'We have an object, looks like a satellite going from north to south, probably in polar orbit . . . Looks like he might be going to re-enter soon . . . I see a command module and eight smaller modules in front. The pilot of the command module is wearing a red suit.' Before Houston could respond, Schirra began playing 'Jingle Bells' on a harmonica he'd smuggled aboard in his spacesuit. He was accompanied by Stafford on sleigh bells.

Customs surrounding Christmas have changed over the years. In the Early Middle Ages, the big festival was Epiphany, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, but Christmas was the key day during most of the later Middle Ages. Christmas was more celebrated for crowning kings than a festival for common folk – both Charlemagne in 800AD and William the Conqueror in 1066 were crowned on Christmas Day. Nor has Christmas always been popular. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans regarded it as a decadent holiday, and its celebration was banned outright in 1644 - mince pies and holly were forbidden and shops were required to stay open. These laws were repealed in 1660. But even in 1849, the headmaster of Bootham School postponed breaking up for holidays until *after* Christmas Day and declared that he would rather have no holidays at all than call the period 'Christmas holidays'.

The word *Christmas* originated as a contraction of "Christ's mass", a phrase first recorded in 1038. So before that date, no one would have been able to even talk about Christmas. However, they did celebrate it under a different name: *geol*. The early Church probably superimposed the Christmas celebration upon earlier pagan celebrations when Yule logs were lit to honor Thor, the god of thunder. Certainly, there is no Biblical evidence to link Christ's birth with mid winter. It is the same with Easter, which is named after the Anglo-Saxon Goddess Eostre. She was the goddess of dawn, who was linked with rabbits and eggs, in case you were wondering what those things have to do with the crucifixion of Jesus.

Whilst we are on the subject of such matters, you may be interested to learn that Jesus' mother didn't call him Jesus. For a start, when Jesus lived in Galilee, the letter 'J' didn't exist. In Hebrew, his name was Yeshua or Yehoshua – from which we get the name Joshua. So Joshua and Jesus were once the same name. In Aramaic - the language Jesus spoke at home - it was Isho or Yeshu. When the Gospels were translated from Hebrew into Greek, Yeshua became Iesous. When the Greek was rendered into Latin, it became Iesus. Classical Latin had no letter J – Caesar was Iulius, not Julius. J is quite a new letter – it wasn't used in English either until around 1630, so Shakespeare never used a J – originally he called his play Romeo and *Iuliet*. In Hebrew Jesus' father's name was Yusuf, not Joseph, and Jesus would have been called Yeshua ben Yusuf ('Joshua, son of Joseph').

People like to think about enjoying a traditional Christmas, but as these odd and fairly random facts I have offered this morning show, there never was such a thing. We all make Christmas in our own image.

However you celebrate your Christmas, I hope your own celebrations are joyful and your holiday all you would wish it to be. For me, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without music and joyfulness. And so we will celebrate with music and merriment. The musical part will begin this afternoon with our Christmas Assembly, and we will have a more formal occasion tomorrow as we welcome the Court of the Merchant Taylors' Company to our school. But just to get the whole thing started, may I wish each and every one of you a very Merry Christmas!