

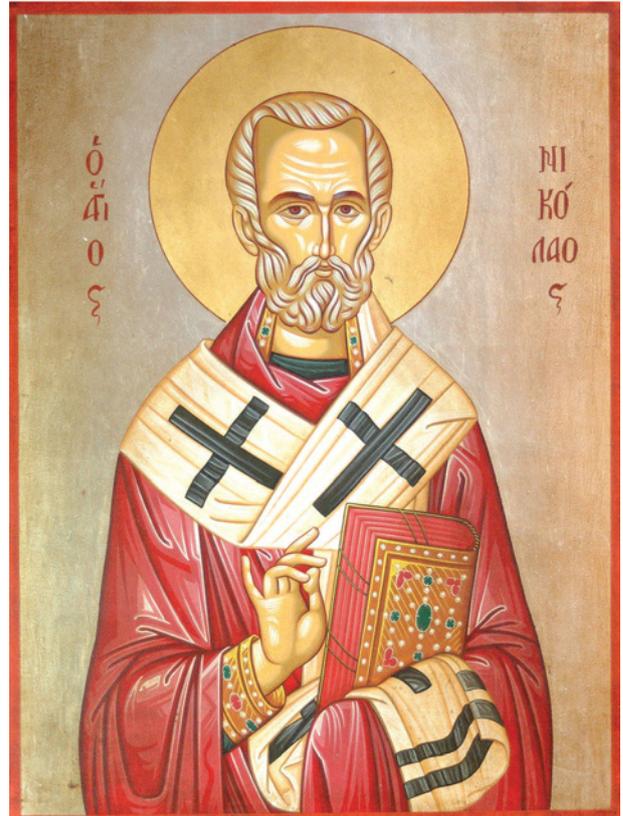
Santa (a Christian figure?)

"In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Acts 20:35

Background

Santa Claus as we know him today is basically an American re-imagining of Saint Nicholas, a very important bishop in 325 AD, when Christians were still persecuted by Rome.

He lived in Myra, which was Greek but is now in present-day Turkey. He believed so deeply in Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give money to the poor" that he used his entire inheritance and his whole life to serve those in need. There are many wonderful stories about Nicholas and his generosity. Two of the most famous legends about Saint Nicholas are that he left coins in children's shoes and that he dropped a bag of gold down a chimney which fell into a stocking hung there to dry. A nice site to start reading more is www.stnicholascenter.org



After his death, the Roman Catholic church made Bishop Nicholas a saint. He was given a feast day (December 6th) and became a very popular saint, celebrated through two millenia. His feast day keeps alive the stories of his goodness and generosity. This day is widely celebrated throughout Europe and remains a special day for gift giving and merrymaking. A particular focus is made on gift giving in honour of Saint Nicholas.

Through the years, in part due to the Protestant Reformation's rejection of sainthood and the falling out of favour of saints; Saint Nicholas, the giver of gifts, has been re-imagined as "Father Christmas," and yes, even "Sinterklaas" or "Santa Claus." So when we give gifts in the name of Santa Claus, we continue on a tradition begun nearly two thousand years ago by a man who even went to prison because of his strong faith in Jesus Christ and desire to follow in Christ's path.

Story

Insert a personal story of when you have given or received a gift in secret or use this one:

"One year our family decided to "keep St. Nicholas Day" on December 6. We were living in an apartment building then and decided to buy a Christmas wreath of greens to decorate the lobby. (This was not the kind of building where management decorated.) So we all went to the Public Market and picked out a most beautiful, large wreath. Later, as my sons kept watch, I hung the wreath in the building's small and spare lobby.

Subsequently, we had the treat of listening to people notice the wreath and comment. "Isn't that pretty," "I wonder where it came from?" and "What a beautiful wreath!" It was a sly joy to listen in. And it was also a challenge not to claim credit.

This experience brought home to me how often the gifts we give come wrapped, not just in bright paper, but in lots of other stuff: our needs for acknowledgment and affirmation, along with who knows what other "strings attached." It's all this extra wrapping that can make gift-giving such a fraught and complex matter this time of year.

--excerpted from Still Speaking Daily Devotional, written by Anthony B. Robinson, a United Church of Christ minister, speaker, teacher and writer. "

Bringing it together

In what ways do we give gifts "with string attached"?

How can giving without seeing the person open the present help us to grow in our faith?

Action

From Anthony Robinson's reflection:

"So this year, consider an experiment. Keep St. Nicholas Day and give a gift secretly. Try it tomorrow or on December 25. Taking ourselves out of the equation, even just a bit, may allow for a renewed sense of the mystery and gifted nature of life itself."

Operation Santa is a fun way to give gifts in absolute secrecy. The recipient (via UnitingCare) will never be able to know the giver and so the gift is given with no thought of thanks or repayment.

Prayer

As we consider giving gifts not for how we are seen, or for the praise and thanks we get, but quietly and anonymously remind us of the joy that comes in the act of giving.