

The Nativity of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ



What is Christmas?

The Feast of the Nativity of Jesus is one of the most joyful days of the Orthodox Church. It ranks next to the greatest holiday, the Resurrection of Jesus. The Feast of the Birth of Jesus is also known as the "Incarnation of Christ." This means that Jesus became a man and came into the world to save us. We also refer to this joyous feast as Christmas.

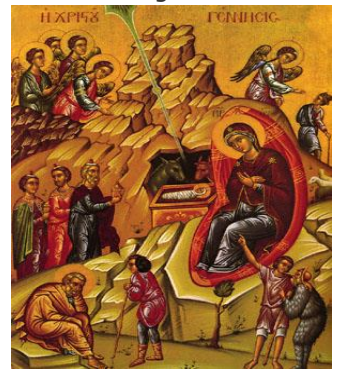
BIBLICAL STORY

The story of the Nativity of Christ is beautifully told in the Holy Scriptures. The story is found in **Matthew 1:18-25** and in **Luke 2:1-20**. No matter how often the Birth of Jesus is told, we realise that it is an important event.



As the story is told by the Apostles, the Roman Empire was powerful. The Romans had conquered much of the then known world. Judea and Samaria, what we know today as Israel, were included in their conquests. Emperor Augustus ordered that a census be taken in all his lands. He needed to know how many people lived in the empire so he could tax them. Everyone had to go to the town of their family's origin to register for the census. This meant that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem. They were descendants of King David and Bethlehem was the City of David.

Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and it was a great distance from Bethlehem. It was about 100 miles over very rugged roads. Moreover, Mary was expecting the baby and it was almost time for her to give birth. Bethlehem was a small town and there were many descendants of David who had come to register for the census. By the time Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem there was no place for them to stay. Joseph tried very hard to find a place to sleep that evening. There was no room at the inn. Finally, Joseph found a cave-like place where they could rest. This place was used by shepherds to protect their sheep in stormy weather. It was here that Mary gave birth to Jesus. The baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the straw in the manger.



That night the shepherds were out in the fields guarding their sheep. Suddenly, there was a bright light which startled the shepherds. The light was so bright that it turned the night into daylight. The shepherds were frightened as nothing such as this had ever happened to them before. Soon an angel appeared and calmed them. The angel said:

"Fear not for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour; which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12).

Then a larger group of angels appeared. They praised and glorified God and sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). When the angels finished singing, they disappeared and the light began to fade until it was dark again. The shepherds were awed and did not know what to do. Finally, they decided to leave their flocks of sheep and go to Bethlehem. They decided that they wanted to see for themselves what the angels had told them. When they got to Bethlehem, they found Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus. They fell to their knees and adored Jesus.

Some Wise Men came from the East for they knew of the coming of Jesus. They had seen a star that told them that a new king had been born to the Jews. They followed the star and were looking for the child. At this time the governor of Judea was King Herod. He was a wicked man and was feared and hated by the people. When Herod heard about the Wise Men looking for the child, he invited them to his palace. Herod asked the Wise Men to find the child so that he too, could worship Him. But Herod was lying! He did not want anyone to take his place. The Wise Men went on to look for Jesus. The Star led them to Jesus and Mary. When the Wise Men found Jesus, they fell to their knees and worshipped Him. They gave Jesus gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh and did not return to Herod. They had a dream that warned them that Herod wanted to harm Jesus. Instead, they returned to their native country by a different route.

Today the Christmas tradition of giving presents, reflects the story of Jesus and the Wise Men offering Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh; Gold to represent a new King being born, Frankincense and Myrrh have a sweet smell and this represents the love of God. You will see all these items being used in our Church today. Many ecclesiastical items are Gold in colour. Frankincense and Myrrh are used in the Censer.



Another tradition we have in our Church around Christmas is St Basil's day 1st January.



Vassilopitta (*or St. Basil's cake*) is a sweet cake with a coin hidden inside, traditionally served on New Year's Eve, when families honour Saint Basil *St. Vasilios*

The New Year Cake came from the story about Saint Basil who it is said told how he helped the poor people to pay their taxes. According to the story, he took some jewellery from each person and gave it to the Governor. The Governor was sorry for the poor people and so he gave the jewellery back, they only problem was Basil did not know who owned each piece of jewellery. This is when it is told the miracle occurred. He baked each piece inside a loaf and when the loaves were given out, everyone had their own jewellery in the piece of loaf.

Today, a coin is hidden inside the cake after baking, and the cake is cut on New Year's Eve with all the family present. The pieces are distributed in a set order: the first is for Christ, the second for Mary, the third is for St. Vasilios, the fourth for the house, the fifth for the head of the family, the sixth for the mother, then one for each of the children. A piece is also cut for each absent member of the family. Whoever finds the coin can look forward to special success in the coming year.

RECIPE FOR A VASSILOPITTA

- 1 cup of oil
- 1 cup of sugar
- 4 eggs
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups of self raising flour
- 1 teaspoon of baking powder
- 1 orange
- Orange rind
- 1 coin

Beat the oil and sugar together. Add the beaten eggs, flour and juice and rind of the orange. Then add the baking powder and the coin wrapped in foil. Bake in an oiled tin for 45 minutes at Gas mark 4-5.



On behalf of the Staff and Academy Trust,
Mrs Baron and Mrs Mantilas
would like to wish you all a
Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year
2016