

The True Meaning of Christmas

How do we retell the story of Christmas each year without losing the meaning of its true gift? One late night, I was reading the story of the ancient 4th century bishop we know as St. Nicholas of Myra as I was preparing my Christmas sermon. He was especially known to give children gifts. He was one of the bishops that attended the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325. If he could talk to us today in his familiar garb he might surprise us not as the jolly old soul of legend but as one weary from persecution and imprisonment. Tired and weary, I fell asleep and later remembered this dream about him.

He placed his finger over his mouth so I would not cry out. "What are you doing?" I started to ask. The words choked up in my throat, and I saw he had tears in his eyes. His usual jolly manner was gone. Gone was the eager, boisterous soul we all know.

He then answered me with a simple statement.

"TEACH THE CHILDREN!"

I was puzzled; what did he mean? He anticipated my question, and with one quick movement brought forth a miniature toy bag from behind a tree. As I stood bewildered, Nicholas said,

"Teach the children! Teach them the old meaning of Christmas. The meaning that now-a-days Christmas has forgotten."



Nicholas then reached in his bag and pulled out a **FIR TREE** and placed it before the mantle.

"**Teach the children** that the pure green color of the stately fir tree remains green all year round, depicting the everlasting hope of all people. All the needles point heavenward, making it a symbol of man's thoughts turning toward heaven."



He again reached into his bag and pulled out a brilliant **STAR**.

"**Teach the children** that the star was the heavenly sign of promises long ago. God promised a Savior for the world, and the star was the sign of fulfillment of His promise."



He then reached into his bag and pulled out a **CANDLE**.

"**Teach the children** that the candle symbolizes that Christ is the light of the world, and when we see this great light we are reminded of He who displaces the darkness."

Once again he reached into his bag and removed a **WREATH** and placed it on the tree.

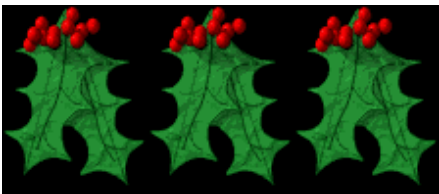
"**Teach the children** that the wreath symbolizes the real nature of love. Real love never ceases. Love is patient, kind,

generous. It doesn't insist on its own way. Real love bears all things, hopes in all things, believes all things, endures all things. Real love never ends."



He then pulled from his bag an ornament of himself.

"Teach the children that I, St. Nick, symbolize the generosity and good will we feel during the month of December."



He then brought out a **HOLLY LEAF**.

"Teach the children that the holly plant represents immortality. It represents the crown of thorns worn by our Savior. The red holly represents the blood shed by Him."

Next he pulled from his bag a **GIFT** and said,

"Teach the children that God so loved the world that HE gave HIS only begotten SON..." "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift."



"Teach the children that the wise men bowed before the

HOLY BABE and presented **HIM** with gold, frankincense and myrrh. We should always give gifts in the same spirit of the wise men."



Santa then reached in his bag and pulled out a **CANDY CANE** and hung it on the tree.

"**Teach the children** that the candy cane represents the shepherds' crook. The crook on the staff helps to bring back strayed sheep to the flock. The candy cane is the symbol that we are our brother's keeper."



He reached in again and pulled out an **ANGEL**.

"**Teach the children** that it was the angels that heralded in the glorious news of the Savior's birth. The angels sang 'Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace and good will toward men.'"



Suddenly I heard a soft twinkling sound, and from his bag he pulled out a **BELL**.

"Teach the children that as the lost sheep are found by the sound of the bell, it should ring mankind to come back to the fold. The bell symbolizes guidance and return."

Santa looked back and was pleased. He looked back at me and I saw that the twinkle was back in his eyes. He said,

"Remember, teach the children the true meaning of Christmas and do not put me in the center, for I am but a humble servant of the One that is the CENTER, and I bow down to worship HIM, our LORD, our GOD."

And with a "click, clickety, click" I saw St. Nicholas no more and I awoke from the dream. What he said in that dream has stayed with me all these years. May this Christmas season fill you with the spirit of Christ. Amen.