

What do Christians celebrate at Christmas?

At Christmas, the story of the birth of Jesus is told. During this time, we also hear about Bethlehem, the manger, shepherds, wise men, angels and much more.

During Christmas, Christians celebrate God's son, Jesus, who came to earth as a human being. It is a miraculous story: Jesus is born as a helpless baby, into a family that was not well off and into a country that had long been oppressed by foreign rulers. It is precisely in this situation that the Christmas message sounds extra powerful. God cares about the fate of people; a new beginning is always possible and vulnerability triumphs over power.

What does the Bible say about Christmas?

The Bible says nothing about our Christmas party, the tree, candles or Christmas dinner. However, the Bible does tell several stories about the birth of Jesus.

Luke: manger and choir of angels

The most famous story is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2: "At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census ..." According to this census, all inhabitants of the Roman Empire had to register themselves in their native city. Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, and his pregnant fiancée, Mary, must also set out to Bethlehem. Nine months earlier, Mary had been told by an angel that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-36). The child was born in Bethlehem and Mary put him in a manger, which was for the animals, because "there was no room for them to stay in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The first maternity visitation consists of a group of shepherds, who were told the glad tidings by angels: "This very day in David's town your Saviour was born – Christ the Lord!" (Luke 2:11).

Matthew: a star, myrrh, frankincense and gold

The evangelist, Matthew, emphasises something different: not a journey, a manger or a choir of angels, but a group of "magi" – astronomers – from a distant land, who are in Jerusalem looking for the new king, whose star they had discovered in the sky. King Herod, who is in power in Jerusalem at the time, tries to find out which child it is, so that he can get rid of it. However, his plan fails: the wise men find Jesus, give him precious, royal gifts and leave for home by another route, without informing Herod. The three wise men, by the way, is not in the story – that was invented later, because they brought three gifts: myrrh, frankincense and gold.

John: light in the darkness

John tells the story of Jesus coming to earth in, yet, another way. He says nothing at all about his birth, but a great deal about who and what Jesus is: God's Word, which was with God from the very beginning, and through which God created the world. He calls Jesus the light that shines in the darkness, without the darkness taking control of it.

What about the nativity scene?

Around Christmas, you often see nativity scenes at churches or in people's homes. Some elements of such nativity scenes come directly from Luke's Christmas story: Mary and Joseph, the manger, the shepherds and the angels. Often, the wise men from Matthew are then added, even though it remains to be seen how quickly the "magi" were on the scene. In addition, the story taking place in a stable somewhere lonely, by the way, is not mentioned in Luke either. In those days, part of the house was often used as a stable. So, the feeding trough may also have been on the first floor of an ordinary dwelling house. What Luke mainly wants to make clear is that Jesus comes not as a powerful king, in the centre of power, but in a remote place, under poverty-stricken conditions.

What does the Christmas star have to do with Christmas?

Many people decorate their homes around Christmas with lights, often in the form of stars. You can see it as a reference to the star that the wise men saw, according to Matthew, showing them the way to Jesus. That star was also visible in their distant land, just as Jesus, according to Matthew, came not only for the people of Israel, but for everyone. The lights also tie in nicely with what we read in John – Jesus as a light in the darkness. They are a sign that in the end, darkness does not have the last word.

For Christians, along with Easter, Christmas is the most important celebration of the year. After all, Jesus came to earth as our Saviour: He wanted to make things right again between God and man. At Easter, we celebrate that Jesus conquered darkness – and even death.