



St Marylebone *Parish Church*

S. Nicolas of Myra, Friday 9.30am Low Mass

It is easy to see how 4th Century Saint Nicolas became Santa (Ni)Claus. How the Bishop of Myra in modern day Turkey became Father Christmas as we have him today is principally it seems the responsibility of three people.

The first is Clement Clarke Moore an American Professor at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York. He wrote a little poem and a friend sent it in to be published anonymously in 1823. It was called 'A visit from St Nicolas' but it became better known as 'twas the night before Christmas'.

Then between 1863 and 1886, Harper's Weekly magazine ran a series of engravings by Thomas Nast. From these engravings the concept of Santa's workshop and the idea of writing letters to him also developed.

Finally in the early 1930s Swedish artist Haddon Sundblom started drawing ads for Coca Cola. His St Nicolas had, for the first time, a red coat trimmed with fur and a large belt.

Nast, Sundblom and Moore 14 centuries after the Saint himself, created a phenomenon.

As ever (and now with so much of our lives) with Americanisation, and human life as designed by capitalist corporations: it seems warm and fuzzy, but when you actually cut into it – it's pretty sterile and drab.

The Story of Saint Nicolas, Bishop in God's Church is actually much richer. 'He is said to have rescued three girls from being forced into prostitution by dropping a sack of gold coins through the window of their house each night for three nights so their father could pay a dowry for each of them.

There's great stories about him cutting down trees possessed by demons, calming storms, and rescuing people from death row. Another famous late legend tells how he resurrected three children, who had been murdered and pickled in brine by a butcher planning to sell them as pork during a famine.

But we get more concrete with an early list that records his being at the First Council of Nicaea in 325. There is a story that says he was temporarily defrocked and imprisoned during the Council for punching Arius in the face. Arius was the leader of a powerful movement at the time that said that Jesus was not eternal, but came to be after the Father, and is therefore subordinate to Him – which is of course, heresy.

Heresy (αἵρεσις 'heresis') literally means choice in Greek. That is, to choose to go one's own way. Arius was a heretic because he thought he knew better than the Body of Church, as represented in the ecumenical council of Bishops at Nicaea.

The choice of relying on your own discernment and resources. Or entering openly into the great corporate act of the Church's listening to the voice of the Spirit – in the Scriptures, in holy teachings, across the world and across the centuries.

Christians, as opposed to heretics, are committed to saying: God is alive, God is at work amongst us. It is only by being 'us': by being united in loving and listening that we can identify and follow what God is doing amongst us. In short, we show each other Jesus. Across time and space. It is only by radically belonging, and whole-heartedly attending to the whole of the Body

of Christ that we can see the way He is leading us. It's a great challenge to us from the man in the little red hat today. Lest he punch us in the face when we join him in the heavenly throng before the Lamb upon the throne.