

On your marks

Many teachers and children's leaders have found the style of storytelling that has been developed within Godly Play to be a very helpful and effective way of opening up the Bible with children. In the Barnabas Team, we have been experimenting with some additional stories presented in this style. We are making them available so you can try them out with your class or children's group and we would be interested in any feedback on how they were received. Remember to tell the story slowly, focusing on the objects and on the story itself, not on the children who are listening. When you have finished telling the story, leave a short space and then use the wondering questions written out for you at the end of the piece.

The following presentation is the real story behind Father Christmas and as such would be good to share with a class or children's group in the run-up to Christmas, although it is careful not to destroy deliberately the traditional myth of the Christmas Eve visitor.

Get set

You can find a full account of the story of St Nicholas, upon which this presentation is based, below.

St Nicholas is such a well-loved character that his story has been a picked up in many countries and he has become associated with gift-giving at Christmas time. This tradition was particularly developed by the Dutch settlers in the New World in the 16th and 17th centuries, where he was called Sankt Nicklaus... abbreviated later to Santa Klaus.

His love for children is also commemorated in another tradition, which was observed in medieval times. On his feast day - December 5th/6th - there were 'boy bishop' celebrations, at which children were elected to perform the functions of a bishop and to hold power for a day. Interestingly, the 11 million initiative from the office of the Children's Commissioner (Take-over Day), which was inaugurated in November 2007, picks up on this idea.

St Nicholas' icon shows him wearing the vestment of a bishop - known as an omophorion - which was made of wool (symbolising the bishop's role as shepherd) and is decorated with large crosses. He also holds an open Bible, which represents his role as a teacher of the faith.

He is the patron saint of a large number of people groups, countries and trades, but most of all St Nicholas has become known as 'the friend of children'.

Collect together the following materials and put them either on a special tray or in a red coloured box, choosing (or making) 3D objects that are both simple and attractive:

- a Roman cross
- a pile of Roman coins
- a model ship
- an orthodox bishop's stole (omophorion) - white wool embroidered with three large crosses



(see icon)

- a chain
- a small parchment with some words of the Nicene creed (from Common Worship)
- three small money bags
- presents wrapped in Christmas paper
- an icon of St Nicholas

(NB: The pieces should all be approximately the same size.)

[For pictures of these items](#) (this opens as a PDF)

You will also need an underlay - a red felt strip, 42 x 11 inches.

Go!

Move with deliberation to the place where you have put the story.

Watch. Watch where I go.

Pick up the tray/box and return to the circle of children.

Everyone needs to be ready.

Remove the underlay from the tray/box and unroll right to left (storyteller's perspective) so that just the first object will fit. Continue to unroll it for each new object and before the next part of the story.

Nicholas lived by the sea in the country we now call Turkey.

Place the Roman cross on the underlay.

His father and mother brought him up to love God and to follow the way of Jesus.

Place the pile of Roman coins on the underlay.

They were a rich family.

Now divide up the pile into two or three, moving them deliberately to the edges of this piece of the felt.

When they died, Nicholas gave away some of the family money, because he knew that Jesus would want him to care for those who had less than he did.

Nicholas set off on his travels and spent time first near Bethlehem and then later in Egypt, where he learned more about God's love.



Place the model boat on to the underlay.

Once on his travels he was in a boat when a storm blew up. Nicholas went on deck and rescued a man who fell from the rigging while taking down the sails. Stories of Nicholas's courage and kindness soon spread, so that when he returned home the people of the area asked him to become their bishop.

Place the bishop's stole down on the underlay.

They wanted someone to be their shepherd, who would look after them and teach them more about Jesus. He became bishop of Myra, which was the capital of that province and the place that the apostle Paul many years before had visited on his sea journey to Rome.

Nicholas was a good bishop - people called him an example of faith and gentleness. He was a humble man who knew what a big job he had been given by God. He knew he was called to live for others.

Place the chain down on the underlay in the same pattern and shape as the stole.

It is sometimes hard to be a follower of Jesus, and Bishop Nicholas was once put into prison by the Roman emperor because of his beliefs. He was released only after many years when a new emperor came to power.

Nicholas was not only kind but also defended the Christian faith. He stood up to those who said false things about Jesus and he probably helped other bishops write a special creed, which made it clear what it was to be a Christian.

Place the manuscript down with words from the Nicene Creed on the underlay.

We still use this creed today.

Nicholas still had some money inherited from his parents and with this he was always ready to help those in need. Because he knew that Jesus had said that we should not make a big fuss about giving money away, he often helped others secretly.

Place the three bags of money down on the underlay.

Once he went by night to toss three bags of gold into a house to help the father there. This man hadn't the money needed to make sure his three daughters could marry and have a secure future, so St Nicholas helped him. Another time he rescued three boys who had been kidnapped and treated cruelly. No wonder he was called 'the friend of children'.

Place the presents wrapped in Christmas paper on the underlay.

Many countries today celebrate Nicholas as their special saint and, particularly near the time of

Christmas, he is honoured as the one who brings good gifts to children everywhere.

Place the icon of St Nicholas on the underlay.

Nicholas was a man who cared for others and who stood up against anything that was not fair. He was a shy man who did not want to be famous. Nevertheless, today he is recognized and honoured all over the world as the man who cared for others and who loved children.

- I wonder what you liked best about the story of St Nicholas.
- I wonder which part of his story you think is the most important.
- I wonder which part of this story is particular for you at the moment.
- I wonder if there is any part of this story we could leave out but still have all the story we need.
- I wonder what Nicholas found hardest about being a bishop.
- I wonder what gifts Nicholas would give to children today.

Background to the life of St Nicholas

Nicholas was born in Patara, a town in the province of Lycia, which is in south-west Turkey. Few facts about his life can be verified; however, he has become one of the most well-respected and revered saints of God worldwide, and in particular within the Orthodox tradition. Alongside St Andrew he is recognized as a patron saint of Russia; many other countries also claim him. Unusually, he is one of the few saints to be singled out in the weekly Orthodox cycle of prayer. Writers describe him as 'an example of faith and an icon of gentleness', because it seems that he did many good things without making a great show of his kindness.

According to legend, he visited both Bethlehem and Egypt, following his parents' early deaths. There is a story that he rescued a sailor who was in danger of drowning and because this sailor told others of what had happened, Nicholas became a candidate for bishop in Myra, the capital city of the province where he was born. Myra is mentioned in Acts 27:5. Among the most famous of the legends associated with him is the one in which he uses his own wealth to rescue three girls who were in danger of being sold into slavery because their father could not afford their marriage dowries. He is said to have tossed three bags of gold secretly into the family's home by night.

Other stories show him as a champion against injustice, particularly rescuing some prisoners who had been falsely accused and three boys who had been kidnapped and treated brutally. It is also said that he was himself imprisoned for a period of time as a bishop during the persecution that happened under the Emperor Diocletian and was only released when Constantine became the new emperor.

He may well have attended the Council of Nicaea, where he stood up against the false teaching of Arius (the Arian heresy). There is a tradition that he was so fierce for the true faith that he punched Arius on the nose, although this seems out of keeping with his character. Interestingly, when the saint's bones were allowed to be examined recently, it is Nicholas's nose that appears to have been broken, so perhaps the legend needs to be reinterpreted!



Nicholas left no theological writings, just the testimony of a selfless life. It is said that when he was made bishop, his response was: 'This office demands a different sort of conduct... one in which one no longer lives for self but for others.' It seems that Nicholas lived out the words of Jesus in Matthew 6, where he tells us that we should give, pray and show our devotion to God *secretly* and avoid making a public show of our faith.