

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025

St. Edward's Parish

Friends, today, on the third Sunday of Advent, the Gospel again turns to St. John the Baptist whose life was focused on preparing the way for Jesus. Last week we considered John's message of repentance as a key to Advent and preparing our own lives for Christ. Today, rather than reflecting further on John the Baptist, I thought it might be helpful to consider another Saint who features prominently during Advent; and who, if we look carefully, also points us toward Christ. Has anyone heard of St. Nicholas? Of course, most people will be familiar with him because it is from him that we get the name Santa Claus. However, while many people know stories about Santa Claus they often do not know about the life of Saint Nicholas and how his life connects with Christmas. I will share a little about his life to help us enter the true spirit of Christmas.

Much of what we know of St. Nicholas was written down long after his death, so some accounts may be exaggerated or invented. However, there has been continuous devotion to him since his death and many stories handed down about him, and some of these details appear quite trustworthy.

St. Nicholas was a Bishop in the city of Myra (in modern Turkey) who lived from about 270–343 AD. It is believed that he was from a wealthy Christian family; however, his parents died during an epidemic, and he gave their wealth to the poor. Among the most famous stories of his generosity concerns a poor father and his three young daughters. During that time a father had to provide a dowry (a payment) so his daughters could enter good marriages. Without a dowry the daughters would face a very uncertain future, even slavery or prostitution. Hearing of the problem, Saint Nicholas, on three different occasions, tossed a purse of gold coins into the poor family's house through an open window, and the father used the gold for the marriage of each daughter. It is said that the bag of coins landed in the shoes or stockings that were left by the fire to dry. This later inspired remembering St. Nicholas as a gift-giver and the custom of placing gifts in stockings by the fireplace at Christmas.

St. Nicholas was also known for his care for children. On one occasion three students were travelling abroad for studies and they were robbed and murdered by an inn keeper who hid their bodies in barrels. St. Nicholas happened to be travelling long the same way and stopped at the inn where he had a dream of what happened. He prayed to God, and the three boys were restored to life and healed. Other stories about him include praying to calm a storm at sea, saving a boat and its passengers; miraculously multiplying a supply of wheat to feed his city during a famine; and rescuing three men from execution who had been wrongly accused.

The most important aspect of St. Nicholas' life, however, is his faith in Jesus. St. Nicholas lived during a severe persecution of Christians. Because of his faith, it is reported that he was imprisoned and tortured. One of the most historically reliable aspects of his life is that he attended the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. This Council sought to defend and explain our belief that Jesus Christ is truly God who had taken on a human nature and was born of Mary. At that time, some were arguing that Jesus was not God but another of God's creatures. Bishop Nicholas, however, stood on the side of defending that Jesus was truly God. This council of Nicaea is where the Nicene Creed was largely written, which we recite at Mass, and we can think of St. Nicholas when we say it.

St. Nicholas died on December 6<sup>th</sup> 343, and his feast day is celebrated on this day every year. It is a good to keep alive his memory in our families and among our children as someone who gave gifts, especially to those in need, who cared for children, and above all professed faith in Jesus. I can only imagine, however, that St. Nicholas would be deeply saddened if we use his name to overshadow Jesus at Christmas, or if gifts and parades in his honour become more important than Sunday or Christmas Mass. If we want to recover a true sense of Christmas, one important piece may be to restore our devotion to the real St. Nicholas. I think we will find that the real St. Nicholas is far more interesting than many modern stories about Santa Claus, and he will be a blessing to our families, our communities, and our faith.