History of Christmas

In ancient pagan times, the last day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere was celebrated as the night that the Great Mother Goddess gives birth to the baby Sun God. It is also called Yule, the day a huge log is added to a bonfire, around which everyone would dance and sing to awaken the sun from its long winter sleep.

In Roman times, it became the celebrations honoring Saturnus (the harvest god) and Mithras (the ancient god of light), a form of sun worship that had come to Rome from Syria a century before with the cult of Sol Invictus. It announced that winter is not forever, that life continues, and **an invitation to stay in good spirit**.

The first day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere occurs between the 20th and 22nd of December. The Roman celebrated Saturnalia between 17 and 24 December.

The early Christians

To avoid persecution during the Roman pagan festival, early Christians decked their homes with Saturnalia holly. As Christian numbers increased and their customs prevailed, the celebrations took on a Christian observance. But the early church actually did not celebrate the birth of Christ in December until Telesphorus, who was the second Bishop of Rome from 125 to 136AD, declared that Church services should be held during this time to celebrate "The Nativity of our Lord and Saviour." However, since no-one was quite sure in which month Christ was born, Nativity was often held in September, which was during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets (modern-day Rosh Hashanah). In fact, for more than 300 years, people observed the birth of Jesus on various dates.

In the year 274 AD, solstice fell on 25th December. Roman Emperor Aurelian proclaimed the date as "Natalis Solis Invicti," the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. In 320 AD, Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ.

AD is short for Anno Domini, or "*Year of our Lord*," as proclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church. Some non-Christians prefer the alternative designation "CE" for "Common Era."