

Some Festivals in January

There are more!

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- 10 Baptism of Christ
- 25 Conversion of St Paul
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1 January - The naming of Jesus

It is Matthew and Luke who tell the story of how the angel instructed that Mary's baby was to be named Jesus - a common name meaning 'saviour'. The Church recalls the naming of Jesus on 1 January - eight days after 25 December (by the Jewish way of reckoning days). For in Jewish tradition, the male babies were circumcised and named on their eighth day of life.

For early Christians, the *name* of Jesus held a special significance. In Jewish tradition, names expressed aspects of personality. Jesus' name permeated his ministry, and it does so today: we are baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38), we are justified through the name of Jesus (1 Cor 6:11); and God the Father has given Jesus a name above all others (Phil 2:9). All Christian prayer is through 'Jesus Christ our Lord', and it is 'at the name of Jesus' that one day every knee shall bow.

5 Simeon Stylites (390 -459)

Quite frankly, this hermit was about as weird as they come. But he loved God, and God blessed him, strange though he was. So perhaps Simeon Stylites should be the patron saint of all REALLY eccentric people.

As a young man he trained in a monastery, found the life too easy and so went off to live on a mountain top, chained to a rock. He began to be talked about, and more and more people came to see him.

Simeon did not want their company, and so planned his escape: to the top of a pillar. For

the next four years he lived on top of a pillar that was nine feet high. More people came by, and so Simeon in desperation added to his pillar, until it grew to be 18 feet high. Still people came to see him, and so three years later, Simeon built himself a real skyscraper – a pillar 33 feet high, from the top of which he enjoyed 10 years of comparative solitude.

Still people came to see him – both Christians and pagans, and so Simeon decided to somehow to build a pillar that was 60 feet high and six feet wide. Here he found peace and quiet, and so here he lived for the last 20 years of his life.

A scholar has written of Simeon: "His preaching was practical, kindly, and free from fanaticism. ... In an age of licentiousness and luxury he gave unique and abiding witness to the need for penance and prayer; his way of life provided a spectacle at once challenging, repulsive and awesome."

Simeon finally died and was buried at Antioch. Perhaps he would have enjoyed the recent chance to take the plinth at Trafalgar Square!

6 January - Epiphany

On 6 January we celebrate Epiphany - the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus. But who were these wise men? No one knows for sure. Matthew calls them 'Magi', and that was the name of an ancient caste of a priestly kind from Persia. It wasn't until the third century that they were they called kings - by a church father, Tertullian. Another church father, Origin, assumed there were three - to correspond with the gifts given. Later Christian interpretation came to understand gold as a symbol of wisdom and wealth, incense as a symbol of worship and sacrifice, and myrrh as a symbol of healing - and even embalming. Certainly Jesus challenged and set aright the way in which the world handled all three of these things. Since the eighth century, the magi have had the names Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior.