

Good King Wenceslas

The Christmas carol about 'Good King Wenceslas', written by John Mason Neale, was published in 1853. It tells of a good man who lived in the tenth century, who was not in fact a king but a duke.

The Story of Good King Wenceslas

There lived a man called Wenceslas. He was born in AD 907 in the modern-day Czech Republic. His father was the Duke of Bohemia and a Christian man and a Catholic.

When Wenceslas was 15 years old, his father died. Wenceslas' mother ruled until he was old enough. His mother was not a Christian so she tried to stop Wenceslas being a Christian too. However, he still prayed for many hours a day.



When he became the Duke of Bohemia, Wenceslas was soon well known for his kindness.

Every Christmas Day, he would give a gold coin to each servant in his castle. Also, every Christmas Eve, he and a servant boy would take food, drink, clothing and wood to all the poor people who needed them. Wenceslas and the servant boy would leave the warm castle and walk through the snow for miles.

Did You Know?

- Wenceslas died in AD 929 and was made a saint.
- He is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.
- A statue of him stands in Wenceslas Square, Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic.
- St. Wenceslas' Day is 28th September, which is also his birthday.

Here is the first verse of Neale's carol, 'Good King Wenceslas':

*Good King Wenceslas looked out,
on the Feast of Stephen,
when the snow lay round about,
deep and crisp and even:
brightly shone the moon that night,
though the frost was cruel,
when a poor man came in sight,
gathering winter fuel.*



Fascinating Fact

The Feast of Stephen means St. Stephen's Day, 26th December, which we call Boxing Day.

Questions

1. Who wrote a hymn about Wenceslas? Tick one.

John Mason Kneal

John Peal

Mason John Neale

John Mason Neale

2. Why did Wenceslas' mother try to stop him being a Christian? Tick one.

because she wanted to be one

because she was not a Christian

because she was the ruler

because she was sad her husband had died

3. Which adjective best describes what sort of person Wenceslas was? Tick one.

friendly

kind

tough

lazy

4. Tick the true facts.

Wenceslas was fifteen when his father died.

Wenceslas was not Christian.

Wenceslas prayed every day.

Wenceslas became the Duke of Britain.

5. When would Wenceslas and his servant boy take gifts to the poor people?

6. Give another name for the Feast of Stephen.

7. Match up these sentences.

Wenceslas was born on

AD 929.

Wenceslas is the

28th September.

Wenceslas died in

patron saint of the Czech Republic.

8. Explain what you think about Wenceslas now you have found out about his life from the text.

Answers

1. Who wrote a hymn about Wenceslas? Tick one.

- John Mason Kneal John Peal
 Mason John Neale John Mason Neale

2. Why did Wenceslas' mother try to stop him being a Christian? Tick one.

- because she wanted to be one
 because she was not a Christian
 because she was the ruler
 because she was sad her husband had died

3. Which adjective best describes what sort of person Wenceslas was?

- friendly kind
 tough lazy

4. Tick the true facts.

- Wenceslas was fifteen when his father died.
 Wenceslas was not Christian.
 Wenceslas prayed every day.
 Wenceslas became the Duke of Britain.

5. When would Wenceslas and his servant boy take gifts to the poor people?

Wenceslas and his servant boy would take gifts to the poor people on Christmas Eve.

6. Give another name for the Feast of Stephen.

Another name for the Feast of Stephen is Boxing Day.

7. Match up these sentences.

Wenceslas was born on	AD 929.
Wenceslas is the	28th September.
Wenceslas died in	patron saint of the Czech Republic.

8. Explain what you think about Wenceslas now you have found out about his life from the text.

Answers will vary.

Good King Wenceslas

The Christmas carol 'Good King Wenceslas', composed by John Mason Neale, was published in 1853. It is based on a legend about a good man who lived in the tenth century, who was not a king, but a duke. Dukes ruled over their land just like kings during the tenth century.

The Story of Good King Wenceslas

Once there lived a man called Wenceslas. He was born in AD 907 in Bohemia, which is in the modern-day Czech Republic. His father was the Duke of Bohemia and a Christian man and a Catholic.

When Wenceslas was 15 years old, his father died. Wenceslas' mother ruled the land until he was old enough; however, she was a cruel leader. His mother was not a Christian and she tried to prevent Wenceslas going to church and following the Catholic faith. Despite this, he would still pray for many hours a day.



When he became the Duke of Bohemia, Wenceslas was soon known for his generosity. It is said that every Christmas Day, he would give a gold coin to each servant in his castle. Also, every Christmas Eve, he and his page boy would take food, drink, clothing and firewood to all the poor people who needed the gifts. Wenceslas and the servant boy would leave the warm castle and walk through the snow for miles.

Here is the first verse of Neale's carol, 'Good King Wenceslas':

*Good King Wenceslas looked out,
on the Feast of Stephen,
when the snow lay round about,
deep and crisp and even:
brightly shone the moon that night,
though the frost was cruel,
when a poor man came in sight,
gathering winter fuel.*



Fascinating Fact

The Feast of Stephen means St. Stephen's Day, 26th December, which we call Boxing Day.



The Legacy of Wenceslas

In AD 929, Wenceslas was killed by his younger brother, Boleslav, who believed that Wenceslas was an ineffective ruler. Shortly after his death, he was made a saint and pilgrims travelled to St. Vitus' church in Prague to see his remains. He is the patron saint of the Czech Republic and a statue stands in honour of him in Wenceslas Square, Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. St. Wenceslas' Day is 28th September, which is also his birthday and a public holiday in the Czech Republic.

Questions

1. Give two facts about the hymn, Good King Wenceslas.

2. In which modern-day country was Wenceslas born? Tick one.

Bohemia

Britain

Turkey

Czech Republic

3. Match up the sentences.

Wenceslas was

ruled the land.

Wenceslas' mother

was a Catholic.

Wenceslas' father

fifteen when his father died.

4. Find and copy one word which indicates the character of Wenceslas' mother.

5. It could be said that Wenceslas was a generous person. Give two examples to explain how we know this.

6. According to Neale's hymn, when did Wenceslas notice a poor man outside?

7. What is meant when the hymn says the poor man was 'gathering winter fuel'?

8. What impressions do you get about Wenceslas' family? Explain your thoughts.

9. Tick true or false for these statements.

	True	False
A statue of Wenceslas stands in Czech Square.		
Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic.		
Wenceslas is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.		
Wenceslas died on his birthday.		
Wenceslas was killed by his younger brother.		

10. What could we learn from Wenceslas? Explain your answer.

Answers

1. Give two facts about the hymn, Good King Wenceslas.

Accept any two: It was published in 1853/It was written by John Mason Neale/It is based on a legend about a good man who lived in the 10th century/It is about a man who was a duke, not a king.

2. In which modern-day country was Wenceslas born? Tick one.

Bohemia

Britain

Turkey

Czech Republic

3. Match up the sentences.

Wenceslas was	ruled the land.
Wenceslas' mother	was a Catholic.
Wenceslas' father	fifteen when his father died.

4. Find and copy one word which indicates the character of Wenceslas' mother.

cruel

5. It could be said that Wenceslas was a generous person. Give two examples to explain how we know this.

Wenceslas gave a gold coin to each servant in his castle every Christmas Day and, every Christmas Eve, he took food, clothing and firewood to the poor people who needed them.

6. According to Neale's hymn, when did Wenceslas notice a poor man outside?

According to the hymn, Wenceslas noticed a poor man outside on the Feast of Stephen, 26th December.

7. What is meant when the hymn says the poor man was 'gathering winter fuel'?

I think 'gathering winter fuel' means the poor man was collecting firewood to burn to keep warm.

8. What impressions do you get about Wenceslas' family? Explain your thoughts.

I do not think Wenceslas' family was very nice because his mother is described as being a 'cruel leader' and his brother kills him. We don't know if his father was good or not.

9. Tick true or false for these statements.

	True	False
A statue of Wenceslas stands in Czech Square.		✓
Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic.	✓	
Wenceslas is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.	✓	
Wenceslas died on his birthday.		✓
Wenceslas was killed by his younger brother.	✓	

10. What could we learn from Wenceslas? Explain your answer.

Possible answers: We could learn to be kind and generous to people less fortunate than ourselves/We could share what we have/We could put ourselves out to help others as he went out in the cold to take gifts to the poor.

Good King Wenceslas

The popular Christmas carol 'Good King Wenceslas', written by John Mason Neale, has been sung since it was published in 1853. It was inspired by a legend about a generous tenth-century nobleman, who was not in fact a king, but a duke. In the tenth century, dukes ruled like a king or queen but over a smaller area of land compared to a monarch.

Once long ago, there lived a man called Wenceslas. He was born in AD 907 in Bohemia, the western region of modern-day Czech Republic, which borders Austria, Germany and Poland. When Wenceslas was 15 years old, his father died. Until he was 18, his Pagan mother ruled the land; however, she was a cruel leader and she sent Wenceslas to live with his grandmother. His mother was not a Christian and she frequently tried to prevent Wenceslas following the Catholic faith. In spite of his mother, he continued to pray for several hours a day, even as a young man.



Wenceslas was keen to put his Christian beliefs of charity to others and showing God's love to all, into practice. When he eventually became the Duke of Bohemia at the age of eighteen, he soon became known for his humility and generosity. It is said that Wenceslas loved Christmas and, every Christmas Day, he would give a gold coin to every servant in his castle. It is also recorded that every Christmas Eve, he would instruct his page boy to gather essential provisions, such as food, drink, clothing and firewood, and together they would set off from the castle. They sought out the poor and needy who would benefit from his gifts.

Here is the first verse of Neale's carol, 'Good King Wenceslas':

*Good King Wenceslas looked out,
on the Feast of Stephen,
when the snow lay round about,
deep and crisp and even:
brightly shone the moon that night,
though the frost was cruel,
when a poor man came in sight,
gathering winter fuel.*

Fascinating Fact

The Feast of Stephen refers to St. Stephen's Day, 26th December, which we know as Boxing Day.

These are the last two verses of the carol.

*"Sire, the night is darker now,
and the wind grows stronger;
fails my heart – I know not how,
I can go no longer."*

*"Mark my footsteps well my page,
follow in them boldly:
you shall find the winter's rage,
chills your blood less coldly."
In his master's steps he trod,
where the snow lay even,
strong to do the will of God,
in the hope of Heaven:
therefore Christians all be sure,
grace and wealth possessing,
you that now will bless the poor,
shall yourselves find blessing.*



In AD 929, Wenceslas was murdered by his younger brother, Boleslav, who was enraged that Wenceslas had surrendered to a German king after a battle. According to a story, Wenceslas was ambushed on his way to Mass by Boroslav and some nobles and he was killed at the church door. After Wenceslas' death, in AD 932, his bones were moved to St. Vitus' church in Prague, which became a pilgrimage site for Christians across Europe. Today, he is the patron saint of the Czech Republic and a statue stands in honour of him in Wenceslas Square, in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. St. Wenceslas' Day is 28th September, which marks his birthday and it is a public holiday in the Czech Republic.

Questions

1. The author writes that the popular Christmas carol, Good King Wenceslas, is 'based on a legend'. What does that mean?

2. Look at the paragraph beginning 'Once, long ago ...' What impressions do we get about Wenceslas' parents?

3. How did Wenceslas' life change when he was fifteen years old?

4. What part of the text indicates that Wenceslas continued to be a devout Christian despite his mother trying to prevent him from living as a Catholic?

5. It could be said that Wenceslas lived according to his beliefs. Explain how this is so.

6. Look at the verses of the hymn. How has the author described the atmosphere and environment? Refer to the text to explain.

7. How is the page feeling and what suggestion does Wenceslas make?

8. What message is Neale giving with these lines from the hymn?

*Therefore, Christians all be sure,
grace and wealth possessing,
you that now will bless the poor,
shall yourselves find blessing.*

9. How is Wenceslas remembered today?

10. What are your thoughts about Wenceslas, the man behind the famous Christmas carol?

Answers

1. The author writes that the popular Christmas carol, Good King Wenceslas, is 'based on a legend'. What does that mean?

A legend is a story based on someone's life who actually lived. The hymn was written about an actual person, but he was a duke, not a king. Some of the facts in the hymn are true and others may not be completely accurate.

2. Look at the paragraph beginning 'Once, long ago ...' What impressions do we get about Wenceslas' parents?

Answers will vary, for example: From this paragraph, the impression I get of his mother is that she was not very nice. She is described as a "cruel leader" who "sent him away to live with his grandmother". We get the impression his father might have been a good man as he is described as a Christian, but we cannot know if he was good or not for sure.

3. How did Wenceslas' life change when he was fifteen years old?

When Wenceslas was fifteen, his father died, and his mother sent him to live with his grandmother. He became the duke at eighteen and returned to Bohemia.

4. What part of the text indicates that Wenceslas continued to be a devout Christian despite his mother trying to prevent him from living as a Catholic?

We can tell that Wenceslas continued to be a devout Christian because the text says "In spite of his mother, he continued to pray for several hours a day, even as a young man".

5. It could be said that Wenceslas lived according to his beliefs. Explain how this is so.

Answers will vary, for example: Wenceslas showed he lived according to his beliefs because he believed that people should show charity to others and God's love to all. We are later told that he gave a gold coin to each servant on Christmas Day and they would take food, clothing and firewood to the poor people who needed them.

6. Look at the verses of the hymn. How has the author described the atmosphere and environment? Refer to the text to explain.

Answers will vary, for example: The author has described the atmosphere by using words like 'brightly shone the moon' and the 'frost was cruel'. We are later told the 'night is darker now and the wind grows stronger' making the atmosphere and environment seem cold, dark and rather frightening.

7. How is the page feeling and what suggestion does Wenceslas make?

The page is feeling cold and tired, as he says, 'I can go no longer'. Wenceslas suggests that the page walks in his footsteps, which will make it easier to walk in the snow if it has already been walked on by the duke.

8. What message is Neale giving with these lines from the hymn?

*Therefore, Christians all be sure,
grace and wealth possessing,
you that now will bless the poor,
shall yourselves find blessing.*

Neale is saying that if people are Christians and have enough to share, they should share and as much as they can and they in turn will receive blessings (from God).

9. How is Wenceslas remembered today?

Today, Wenceslas is remembered by a statue in Wenceslas Square in Prague, Czech Republic and he is also the patron saint of the Czech Republic with his feast day on 28th September.

10. What are your thoughts about Wenceslas, the man behind the famous Christmas carol?

Pupil's own response.