

Saint Nicholas, Black Peter & Santa Claus

This is a story about a man who became a bishop in Turkey. He is honored in Holland and the Netherlands Antilles every year as 'Sinterklaas'.

Tradition has it that he's accompanied by 'Zwarte Pieten', Black Peters, helpers who have painted their faces black. The international community has protested against this national custom, but old habits die hard.

'Sinterklaas' crossed the ocean in a letter and Coca Cola turned him into Santa Claus. Santa became immensely popular in the Americas. He flew back to Europe and conquered the rest of world. In Russia he's known as Father Ice.

Saint Nicholas

Once upon a time there was a little boy called Nicholas. He was lucky, because his parents were very well off. His bed was soft and his belly full. He had everything, yet, he wasn't happy; not because he wanted more, but because he was very compassionate. How could he be happy when there were so many people around him who had so little?



One of these unfortunate families lived right next door. The man of the house had five beautiful daughters, but there would be no weddings in the

future. Although he worked long hours, there was hardly enough money left for food, let alone for wedding dresses and goats.

Little Nicholas couldn't stand it. Out of compassion he saved the money he got for his birthday and threw it through the bedroom window of the girls. Only when he heard the exhilarating shrieks, he felt happy. After a few years he was happiest ever when the first girl got married. The girls never knew who had been their benefactor.

Nicholas remained generous all his life. Not only was he compassionate, he could also listen as no other. People didn't have to tell him much about their miseries; just a few words sufficed. Because of this ability Nicholas could help a lot of people. It was like a dream come true. This was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life and he did it.

Nicholas became bishop in Turkey and died on the 5th or 6th of December.

In those days Turkey was a great center of learning. People from the east, the west and the north flocked to the capital. They heard about Nicholas, the rich son, who left behind a life of luxury to help the poor and the needy and they told the stories to the people back home. So it came to be that Nicholas' fame traveled wide and far. It even reached the country known today as The Netherlands.

When he died, many Catholics traveled to his grave and prayed for a better life, better pay or even a job, love or simply food. A lot of these prayers were answered. Some of them were true miracles. That's why Nicholas became a saint.

HOLLAND

Catholics worship saints of whom they own statuettes and drawings. Protestants don't believe in praying to representations of religious people.

Hundreds of years ago a bloody war was fought over religion in the Netherlands. It was won by the Protestants. In the south most people remained Catholic, but from the churches in the north all the reminders of the Catholic faith were removed; all of them, even Saint Nicholas, but he didn't really disappear.

Saint Nicholas is the only saint who has been impersonated by both Catholics and Protestants all over Holland for generations. The celebration

of his life in December is high on the list of what the Dutch think of as important.



Before the Industrial Revolution this celebration of Saint Nicholas didn't amount to much. People were very poor compared to today. The extras handed out were cookies with a little bit of sugar and cinnamon, or dried fruit in a loaf of bread or a cake. These small

luxuries were not meant for everyone. Only ailing children and pregnant women got them. Spices and fruit were very expensive, especially in winter.

The Industrial Revolution brought higher wages to the whole of Europe and North America. People could afford more, but not everybody. The laborers in the factories worked up to twelve hours a day, six days a week and they didn't earn much.

While a lot of white people became richer, the black people in the Americas remained poorest. They were slaves and weren't allowed to own anything, for they themselves were owned by white plantation owners.

People in the north of the U.S. were angry when they heard of the way slaves were treated in the south and people in the south reacted indignantly when they heard the allegations of inhuman treatments. The two started a civil war over the matter.



Meanwhile there were slave owners, who remained in Europe and who sent younger sons or poor family members (sometimes they had embarrassed the family and needed to be gotten rid off) to manage the plantations in the Americas.

These owners in Europe ordered their managers overseas to buy young and pliable slaves. They had these children shipped to Europe, where they were given as presents to wives and daughters; sometimes they were kept by the owners themselves, much as today puppies and kittens are bought.

These knaves (*Du: knechten*) were dressed in the family colors. They posed at the feet of their mistresses or behind their masters for the great painters of the day.



Although this practice was upheld by almost all the affluent Europeans with ties to the slave trade in the Americas, only in Holland were the paintings of enslaved children, all of them boys, used as models for the 'Zwarte Pieten', the Black Peters, of tomorrow.

December

Everywhere in Europe people celebrated the birth of Christ in churches. This tradition was followed by a simple or maybe, if one was rich enough, a copious meal. Christmas was a solemn affair. The dark days before spring arrived, however, were very long, cold and extremely boring. The Dutch had 'Sinterklaas' who brought relief.



St. Nicholas & Black Peter in Holland

Times changed. Great Britain was the first to abolish the slave trade. Other countries followed. In the U.S.A. the North won the civil war and the southern slaves were freed.

Holland was the last colonial power to stop the slave trade. It had been responsible for a great part of the country's wealth, but not everybody in Holland had benefitted from the colonial boom. There were lots and lots of people living in poverty in the country itself and on the long voyages across the Atlantic Ocean Dutch sailors had been just as likely to die as had been the slaves stacked and chained in the holds of the ships.

Only after the slave trade was abolished, a Dutch writer thought up a helper for the Saint, who until then had delivered all the presents himself. The writer was probably enchanted with the exotic and extravagantly dressed enslaved boys in the service of wealthy ladies and gentlemen, for he drew one of these boys at the Saint's side.



His drawing had great success. In one go the Dutch people had a knave of their own; someone with a social status which was even lower than the one they had. It must have seemed like the invention of the century. Didn't Dutch kings and queens themselves ride in a golden carriage with slaves painted on one of its sides? Why shouldn't the popular Saint Nicholas, loved by all, have a little black slave of his own?

The first Black Peter was just a drawing, nothing more. He appeared in a book as a helper of the Saint, but soon he appeared everywhere. For lack of genuinely black children, the Dutch painted their faces black with great enthusiasm. They have been doing so for over a century.

So who was Black Peter? A white man with a blackened face and black gloves, thick red lips and large golden earrings, who couldn't help but talk gibberish and who could do no more than follow orders. He depicted a

negro in the position of a servant. On paintings made during slavery identically dressed black boys are seen in European households.

What was Black Peter's job? The helper of Saint Nicholas carried a big brown bag filled with presents and sweets. After the contents were handed out, the bag was used for bad children, who were forced into the bag by Black Peter. He carried them to the harbor, flung them into the hold of the Saint's ship which sailed back to Spain, where Saint Nicholas owned a gorgeous mansion, filled with Black Peters who took care of everything. In the basement there were lots of small, cold and dark dungeons where the bad kids had to spend the rest of their lives.

Black Peter helped Saint Nicholas to educate children. The good ones were praised and rewarded, the bad ones reprimanded and punished. Black Peter carried out the punishments. He spoke in a strange accent and sounded like someone from Surinam, a former colony of Holland.



Children feared Black Peter. He was painted a shiny and unnatural black and talked funny. He made loads of mistakes and acted dumb. He also carried a bunch of twigs to hit naughty children with and a large brown bag into which incorrigible naughty children were taken to Spain, but he could hold the Saint's staff very well, he could walk for miles and climb rooftops and chimneys as no other.



Every year this message was hammered into children's subconscious: black people were to be feared, you couldn't trust them to do a job well (the Saint couldn't leave them alone for a minute) and they talked gibberish.



Saint Nicholas was loved in general, but feared, too. He was a stern educator who sentenced children to be punished by Black Peter or who punished them himself with: "No presents for you, I'm afraid, you've been a bad, bad boy."

Many years passed. Many immigrants from all over the world came to Holland. Many were from the former colonies,

Nederland's Indië, now Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, but also arriving in the country were people from Turkey (!) and Morocco, from Ghana, Iran, Spain, Italy, Belgium and Germany and from countries in war, like Afghanistan, Iraq and the former republic of Yugoslavia, now Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia and Kosovo.

Every year a jet with at least three hundred Dutch Antillean students, from all six islands, Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba, arrives at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. They are sent to universities across the country. Many are offered jobs by Dutch companies.

A town like Delft harbors many students from abroad. They study at the Technical University. They come from countries as far away as China and Israel and when they've accomplished their goals they return to their own countries.

In a city like Amsterdam there are more than fifty nationalities who co-exist in peace, all of them permanently residing in the capital.

The population of the Netherlands has changed. It's no longer all-white and hasn't been so for quite a while.

Protest

One day an actress in Sesame Street, Gerda Havertong who was born in Surinam and a woman of color, protested unsuccessfully on national TV against the existence of Black Peter.

It didn't affect him. He remained as popular as ever and he kept on appearing every December. Colored people, like Gerda, are still

nicknamed 'Zwarte Piet' today and if they don't like it, they are told that they are free to take the boat back to the countries they come from. Most of them are Dutch by birth. This aggressive attitude is shown not only to grownups like Gerda, but also to children.

People also protested against the punishments. Science proved that children who were beaten became aggressive adults. Parents and teachers were advised not to hit children anymore. The Saint gave the right example. He became so friendly and kind, there isn't a child today who doesn't love him unconditionally. He's become everyone's favorite Grandfather.

As Black Peter wasn't ordered to carry out punishments anymore, he, too, became much nicer. He also stopped speaking in such a frightening accent. You might say the new Black Peter behaved more like the Dutchman he had always been than the clothed savage he was meant to portray.

Black Peters meant no harm. In songs all children sang: "even though he (Black Peter) is as black as soot, his meanings are good and smooth".

People from around the world have been wondering why the Dutch insist on maintaining a custom which includes insulting and belittling one particular people. They cannot and will not understand why a civilized nation would want to continue offending people of color.

The majority of the Dutch people, doesn't understand how anyone could be offended by a non-existent fantasy figure from a time long gone by. Who is the rest of the world to criticize their tradition?

The Saint in the U.S.A.

Once upon a time, not so very long ago there was a grandfather in Holland, who missed his grandson in the United States, very much. He sent him a letter and a present. The present was from 'Sinterklaas', who loved all children. 'Sinterklaas' was very old, he had a white beard and wore red clothes.

The letter was in English. One day it reached the desk of the editor of the New York Times. He published the letter.

A Coca Cola advertising agent grabbed the paper and rushed to his boss. Just before Christmas the company managed to publish a drawing of what they believed to be Saint Nicholas on billboards. Ads were placed in all the big newspapers. His name was changed into Santa Claus.



Look at the picture to the right: Santa's holding a bottle of Coke.

The tall bishop of the Netherlands has undergone a few changes: he's now short, fat and jolly, his long white beard is shorter and the miter is replaced by a funny, soft cap. The bishop's garments have been exchanged for a comfortable warm, red coat with white trimmings and a black belt.

Increasing Protests against Black Peter



celebrities, white and black protested against B.P.. They took the matter to court and a judge proclaimed B.P. to be an act of racism.

Many different Peters applied for the job of the New (not-Black) Peter. Some, like the Cheese Pete (yellow) and the White Pete were truly scary, but the 'Stroopwafel' Pete (a 'stroopwafel': two round, thin waffles with syrup in the middle) and the Rainbow Pete were lovely.



An artist born on the island of Curacao, a former Dutch colony, initiated the organized protest against Black Peter in Holland. Many Dutch

The discussion became more and more heated. The entire country was divided into two camps. Those against claimed: "Black Peter must go." Most of them were descendents from immigrants. Most of them were colored. The white people who joined this camp felt for the colored people who lived here and were forced to witness this humiliation every year.

Those in favor of upholding the practice told the press in no uncertain terms: "Hands off of Black Peter", "Black Peter belongs to us", "Black Peter is ours," "Black Peter is here to stay." They just wouldn't let go of Black Peter.

Even the prime minister himself announced that Peter was black and there was nothing he could do to change that fact.

The PVV, a political party, said that this was what you got when you allowed foreigners into your country. They took away all the good things; first jobs, next euros, then safe flights (9/11) and now the 'Zwarte Pieten.' How much more could a nation take? Whose country was this anyway?

The Black Peter Riot of 2014



The arrival of 'Sinterklaas' is an important yearly event. The preparations, the journey by boat, everything is planned and discussed in great detail in a special kids' program, called 'Het Sinterklaas Journaal'.

This year the Saint arrived with only one Black Peter aboard his ship. They docked in Gouda. However, on the quay there were numerous Black Peters ready to give the Saint a helping hand. Everything went well at first.

And then the unthinkable happened. At least, that's the way it looked on national television. All of a sudden there was police everywhere. People were pushed and shoved. We see a terrified child being whisked away by an adult.



Did the party in favor of B.P. and the one against get into a fight?

On screen the nation sees the Saint and his helper after the event. They are very sad.

People are angry, furious even; how could anyone

spoil a children's party? The culprits must be the protesters against Black Peter!

Then a documentary is shown on TV, made by a young white reporter two weeks after the event. We see those against Black Peter link arms and stand firm. It's a peaceful demonstration lead by people who are against the use of Black Peters. At one point in time they are surrounded and pushed from behind as well as from the front. There's nowhere they can go. Then, one of the protesters is lying face-down on the street. An officer is kneeling on his back. We hear the man saying he can't breathe. The officer doesn't budge. Excessive force by a policeman? The officer is white. The man on the street is black. Could the world be right? Is Black Peter indeed a racist custom?

Santa's helpers in the U.S.A.



The American Santa lives on the North Pole and flies from house to house in a sledge drawn by reindeer (Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer is the most famous one). He delivers presents to whole families all across the Americas. Europe has its own Santa, who lives in the north of Finland.

Who helps Santa? Naturally, the Afro-Americans couldn't be used, not after fighting a war over slavery.



The Americans came up with the elves, Irish folk figures. These elves make all the presents and wrap them up, just in time for Christmas.



What's the problem?



What are the Dutch people to do with 'Sinterklaas' and his Black Peter? A lady who worked for the U.N. claimed that the Dutch upheld a racist custom. Her suggestion was to stick to Santa Claus.

Ignorance is a big problem. The Dutch don't know they

hurt other people with Black Peter. The U.N. lady doesn't know that Santa is a frivolous look-alike of the one and only 'Sinterklaas'.

'Sinterklaas' and Santa Claus are not the issue. Everybody agrees both are good for children and adults alike. One might disagree whether it's healthy to shower children with gifts from the same man twice in one month, but that's something for Dutch parents to decide on.

The issue is 'Zwarte Piet', or Black Peter. The practice of ridiculing people of color hurts Dutch children, because they will look at colored people (even if they are colored themselves) in a negative way. The message Black Peter sends is: black is valued less than white.

It's difficult for white people to understand those who feel offended by Black Peter. Representatives of the Anglo-Saxon culture have dominated the world and controlled multiple countries and peoples for centuries. They couldn't have done so without upholding strict rules and administering severe punishments. Many of the punishments handed out to slaves in the Americas were also handed out to prisoners and criminals in Europe.

Understanding those who feel offended acquires listening skills. Saint Nicholas is a fine example of how listening has enabled him to help others overcome their difficulties. The veneration of this historical figure has brought Catholics and Protestants together for ages.

Fear

During slavery Europeans often lead lonely lives in the Americas. When they set foot on American soil for the first time they were only a few amongst many Indians. When these were driven away, Europeans in the south imported many African slaves, but soon they were outnumbered again. Now they feared for their lives on the plantations.

Fear makes a cruel master as the slaves experienced. They had far more reasons to fear their white owners than vice versa. There was nobody they could turn to in times of need. Their owners had their neighbors, the police, the teachers and pharmacists, the doctors and the judges, the whole country on their side. When a slave had the bad luck to become the property of a disgruntled, dissatisfied, frustrated, drunk or sadistic master, his chance of reaching the age of thirty-five lessened dramatically.

It may well be that the Dutch put all their fears into Black Peter, who at the moment of his creation, was a symbol for everything exotic, strange and dangerous.

Is it possible that these same fears lie at the heart of the Dutch reluctance and their fierce opposition to set Black Peter free?

Today

Once upon a time a writer gave Saint Nicholas a helper, who looked like a slave. Slavery had already been abolished. Black Peter was his name.

Times changed. Imitating black people by painting their white faces black, the Black Faces, was prohibited in the U.S.A. many years ago. It must have escaped the attention of the Dutch. They are still proud of Black Peter.

Saint Nicholas is very much alive in the Netherlands. He is a great listener and he can help us solve this problem. Saint Nicholas helps all children and their parents. He knows how to set things right. He knows how to bring people together.

The End

A personal note

My name is Penelope. I am the writer of the piece you've just read. I am from Curacao. Curacao is sixty kilometers in length and when you're more or less in the middle you can see the sea on both sides to your right and left. It's small, but there are more than thirty nationalities on the island and the majority is colored. Curacao is a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. I am Dutch.



When I was six, I saw Black Peter take away a boy during the celebration of 'Sinterklaas' at school. The boy was pushed into this large brown sack and I never saw him again. I lost all my trust in both Black Peter and the Saint that day. Hadn't it been the Saint who had ordered Black Peter to abduct the boy? Of course the child had to have done something truly atrocious, like kill someone. I couldn't imagine what it really could have been, but I was convinced that it had to have been something so horrible, only Saint Nicholas could handle it. The Saint's executioner was Black Peter. I didn't trust the two of them. I was afraid. But I had had six years of excitement and doing my very best to please the Saint and his helper.



I stopped believing the Saint was a real saint when I was seven, so my disappointment didn't last too long. My brother was the one to point out to me three different Saints in one day. My mother said they were Assistant Saints. I believed my brother.

Many years later we came home after a 'Sinterklaas' party. My little sister was the only one who still believed in the Saint. We were walking up the garden path. All at once there was a horrible roar coming from the house. We stopped in our tracks, my sister was in shock, but my mother angrily marched past us, muttering: "Black Peter has been hitting the bottle

again." She had left her brother, Uncle Albert, a notorious drunkard, to leave my sister's presents on her bed during our absence. By behaving like a raving madman he ruined 'Sinterklaas' for my sister forever.

I moved to Holland to complete my studies. Every 5th and 6th of December there were Black Peters everywhere I looked; their light blue, green or grey eyes peering out of unnaturally shiny black faces, their thick red lips in marzipan or chocolate grinning at me at the baker's, tiny Black Peters climbing up and down poles at the toy stores.

I fell in love and married a Dutchman. We had a daughter who had a lovely brown skin. When she reached the right age, she, just like all children her age, was painted black in the face. My mother-in-law sewed her a lovely cap adorned with a beautiful feather to go with her outfit.

When my son reached the right age, I was happy he didn't have to play 'Zwarte Piet'.

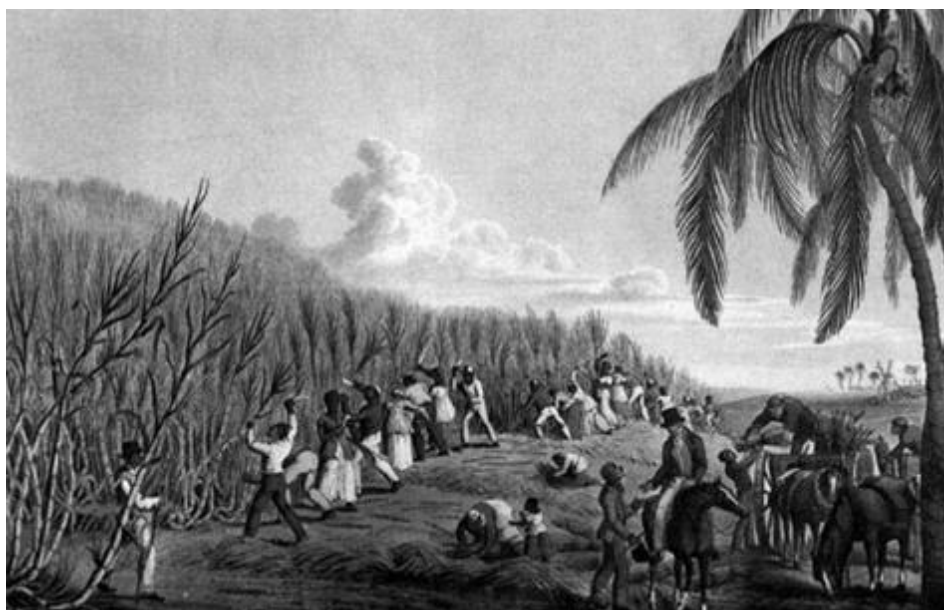


My husband built the most beautiful surprises, a ship or a house, into which we stowed the presents and the letters from the Saint. We have lovely memories of past 'Sinterklaas' feasts.

In my absence 'Sinterklaas' on Curacao changed. Sometimes he was black, sometimes white, sometimes the Peters were white, sometimes they were black. Open cars would drive by with five Saints of different color. It doesn't seem to matter what the color of Saint Nicholas' skin is, nor that of Peter, but is that really the case?

I understand those who believe Black Peter must stay. In my veins runs the blood of white slave owners. I understand their fear in the Americas. I would have been afraid, too, had I been all-white, surrounded by so many blacks.

I also understand the other side, the side that says Black Peter must go. My paternal great-grandmother was a slave. I feel her pain even though I've never met her. She died long before I was born. She suffered from



the actions of white forefathers, such as my maternal great-grandparents. That side of the family owned sugar plantations in Martinique and in French Guyana.

My maternal grandmother, who was white, lived with us. She taught me a song and a dance that accompanies it. Part of it goes like this:

Bar the windows, bar the doors,
kick the nigger man out the door.

I wish to point out that the black man inside was to be kicked out after all escape routes had been barred, which means he was to be driven through the boards.

My mother used to say: "What are those people (colored people) complaining about? Slavery was abolished, wasn't it? Maybe they should try working for a change."

Eighty percent of the population on Curacao is colored. When I look in the mirror I see a colored person. Did Gran see me that way? I guess she did, pulling my nose every day to make it straighter, like hers. "I'm going to give you a nose with character," she used to say. I loved my Gran. I pulled my nose a few



times extra, just for her. As for my nose, Gran treated me no differently from my all-white brother. His nose was so flat, Gran said there was no use in even trying to put some character in that one. I felt very special. There was still hope for me.

Did my mother see me as a black person? Only my hair was a disappointment. It was much too curly, so I wore a towel over my head at home and pretended my hair was long and straight, until such time when I could have it straightened and let it grow until it reached my hips. It never came that far. Straightened



hair is too much work. I'm back to natural and curly.

Does my mother treat me differently from my sister who has long hair flowing over her shoulders without the use of toxic chemicals? Yes. I'm treated much better.

I am a follower of 'Sinterklaas', a friend to children and therefore a friend to all of us, a wise old man who brings people together.

The gospel according to 'Sinterklaas'

Listen
Feel
Think
Act

Yesterday I received an e-mail from the Saint himself:

Dear Penelope,

Thank you for sending me the article.

Let me start with Black Peter. Believe me when I say that all I wanted was for the slaves to be free. When that happened I was delirious with joy, i.e. until I met this family in the Netherlands. They had been very rich, but lost all their money. They had filed for bankruptcy. They had with them Peter, a black boy free now, but they couldn't feed him or take care of him anymore. What were they to do? What was I to do other than take him in, give him a cot, food and a job? Word got around and black boys from all over Europe were dumped on my doorstep and abandoned in my garden.

The Peters became old. They couldn't help me anymore. Then the Dutch painted their faces black and boarded my ship. They offered their help. How could I refuse? They were with many and I was left with two frail Peters who could hardly hear or see.

I tried arguing with them, told the Dutch in nice and not-so-nice terms that I didn't want them to paint their faces black, that they were fine just the way they were, that they were mocking the Peters, insulting them, but they insisted.

I love the Dutch. I don't agree with them on the issue of Black Peter, but I beg of you who feel the boy should be set free immediately to reconsider. The truth is that the Dutch feel inadequate compared to my Peters and all people of color. These people have been offering far better services for far longer and the Dutch know it. They think they can fool me by painting their faces black, but I know the naughty ones when I see them.

It's a strange custom, I know. We've come upon hard times when a white person insists on hiding behind a black face and ridiculing and insulting black people, expecting those same black people to laugh and applaud and tell the white person with the black face: "Aren't you the funny one?"

The Dutch have given me and my Peters a home. Because of them I now have a twin brother, which brings me to my second point, Santa Claus, the commercial wizard of the family.

I've been given a new suit, a herd of flying reindeer, elves, a second home on the North Pole and a wife. I speak more languages than I knew existed. I'm a globetrotter and I like it.



My twin has broken through internationally. I'm happy for him, even though he's all for the big bucks. He still thinks Baby Jesus is the only thing between him and the top. Santa means well.

The Dutch mean well, but times change. Everybody can see that I represent the Church, but Santa has been given to the people. Religion is no longer a part of his life. He's for everybody.

That's the difference between us. I'm Saint Nicholas, the older one. I'm the brother who worries: who will protect Baby Jesus from Santa? I love my brother, but I'm not blind to his faults.

I love the Dutch, but I'm not blind to their faults. I worry about them. They force me to accept their Black Peters. I cannot do so anymore. I've listened to and learned from them for centuries. I know the way the dice roll. I have to protect all children from this damaging practice.

I must enlighten the parents that I, Saint Nicholas of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, have made a grave mistake by not speaking out and taking a stand against 'Zwarte Piet'.

For the Black Peter Revivalists I have a word of advice: Give Black Peter his due. He needs a rest. He has played his role. The curtains are drawn.

And as for you, citizens of the Netherlands, I'll be back. You know I will. I'm a patient man, but this has gone on far too long. Black Peter is damaging to my international reputation and yours as well. Stop!

In the meantime I hope everyone shares, listens and understands and I wish for everyone to live happily ever after,

A jolly Saint Nicholas in 2015 & Merry Christmas,

The Saint

December 2014,

Penelope