

# Reflecting on who Jesus is and is not

Dan Luby/CNS

We instantly recognize all the icons of the Christmas season, and they are comforting to us. But there also is a subtle risk in this. Knowing precisely what everything means at this time of the incarnation, anticipating exactly what to expect, can invite an imperceptible but powerful shift of our attitude from comfort to complacency.

Are we open to being surprised by Jesus, as his first followers were?

As Christmas approaches, plaster nativity characters emerge from tissue-paper cocoons and resume their customary places around the manger. Familiar Christmas carols played on heirloom records create a scratchy, nostalgic soundtrack for these busy days. And in treasured stories read aloud, heard on the radio or seen in TV specials, the season's comforting narratives resound in our ears.

Christmas is so familiar! We respond to the images, we remember the feelings, we know the story by heart.

But the Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas was neither familiar nor predictable to the people who were part of the original Nativity scene.

To the innkeeper in Bethlehem who could offer only a place among the animals in the stable, Jesus must have seemed an ordinary, if pitiable, baby, another luckless child of poor and desperate parents.

But to the shepherds, to Joseph, even to Mary, the baby in the straw bed was an awe-inspiring mystery, evoking not only feelings of affection and gratitude, but of reverent fear as well.

And if the Jesus of Bethlehem was a mystery to those around him, so was the Jesus of Nazareth and of Cana and of Jerusalem. Jesus was to consistently confound the predictable expectations of all.

The public sometimes viewed Jesus as a hero, sometimes as a fool. His enemies regularly misunderstood his origins and the meaning of his words or deeds. He seemed to them to speak in riddles, urging forgiveness of enemies, describing mourning and persecution as sources of blessing.

Jesus gave time and energy and compassion to those society deemed unworthy: foreigners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the ritually unclean and the religiously lax.

Even Jesus' family and closest companions found themselves mystified by him, as their narrow pre-



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conceptions proved too cramped for the reality of his identity and mission.

Jesus' kinsman, John the Baptist, went into the desert preparing for the glorious advent of the Lion of Judah. Instead, when the "one who is to come" finally arrived, he turned out to be the humble Lamb of God.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" his friend Peter gave the right answer: "You are the Messiah." But Peter's conviction that Jesus would enter

into glory painlessly, without risk to himself or his followers, earned him a stinging correction from the Lord.

Saul of Tarsus thought he knew who Jesus was: a shameless heretic deserving of the public execution he received. What Saul discovered on the Damascus road was that Jesus was not his enemy, but his Lord.

On this side of Easter, the surprises Jesus consistently presented to the people of first-century Palestine seem understandable enough. With the advantage of post-resur-

## In a Nutshell

Christmas is familiar! We know the story by heart. But are we open to being surprised by Jesus, as his first followers were?

The mystery of the Incarnation — God taking on human flesh and bone, sinew and emotion — remains unfathomable.

Bethlehem reminds us that no setting is so lowly, no situation so routine that Christ cannot make himself known through it.

rection insight, we are not surprised in the same ways today.

Still, the Christmas mystery of the incarnation, of God taking on human flesh and bone, sinew and emotion remains unfathomable. Christmas is a time to look in a fresh way at the mystery of who Jesus is — and is not — and what his becoming one of us means.

If our expectations are too precise, our vision too predictable, we can miss him as easily as his earliest listeners.

- When we conclude that our own uncertainties of faith or our failure to love put us beyond Jesus' forgiveness, we miss him.

- When we see among us people we think are outside the reach of God's care, we are missing the truth of his Incarnation as surely as his first-century detractors.

- When our generosity remains constricted and our imitation of Christ extends only to those we know and of whom we approve, not only do we miss him, but we limit the possibility of others feeling God's love in our imitation of him.

- When we look for Jesus only in extraordinary circumstances or in explicitly church-related settings — on retreat or at Mass or in Scripture — we obscure our ability to recognize him in the ordinary and the secular, and we miss him.

Bethlehem is the reminder that no setting is so lowly, no situation so routine that Christ cannot use it to make himself known to us.

Christ made flesh: Christmas is the time to rediscover him in the warp and woof of ordinary human existence, which is forever transformed by God's unique, unrepeatable act of generosity and communion in the Incarnation.

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