

FaithAlive!

This month's adult-education package asks not only who Jesus is, but also who he is not. Jesus no doubt surprised the people of his time who expected a different kind of messiah.

Food for Thought

What is Jesus not? He is not a hostile divider of people.

But many examples of hostile human division could be cited. In some cases people even use Jesus' name to justify the hurtful walls between racial groups, nations, family members, social groups and classes.

Perhaps it seems curious at Christmas time to talk about what Jesus is not. But the Incarnation surprised people 2,000 years ago. For lots of people then — and now — the Incarnation just didn't take form as they might have planned it.

Jesus became one of us, which isn't the same as saying he was made in our image. We're invited to live — to act — in his image.

Notably, however, Jesus was a healer. Evidently his followers are meant to be healers too. That encompasses the healing of human divisions of so many kinds.

D. Gibson

Editor, Faith Alive!

Faith in the Marketplace

Earlier this year, Faith Alive! asked readers around the country to describe in their own words what the message of Christmas is for these unique times.

Selected reader responses:

"The message of Christmas in these troubled times is one of hope — that with the birth of Christ we have a renewal of our hope and desire for peace. That was the message of the angels."

— Paul Cerio, Ft. Calhoun, Neb.

"Peace in the world." — Jo Wojda, Mapleton, Ill.

Lend us your voice:

An upcoming edition asks: If someone asked who God is for you, how would you respond?

If you would like to respond for possible publication, please write: Faith Alive! 3211 Fourth St. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1100.

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The kind of gift Christmas really is

Brian M. Kane/CNS

The celebration of Christmas probably developed a few centuries after the founding of the church. It replaced older pagan festivals with a message that God came into the world in a very particular place and time.

Christmas is not about "once upon a time," but about this person, place and time.

By contrast, pagans were not so concerned with the individual person. They were more focused upon preserving society as a whole.

Celebrating a birthday, which is what Christmas does, points to this difference. Birthdays are about celebrating the promise of the future, not simply accomplishments of the past.

Today, we take birthdays for granted. But few in the ancient world cared about the date someone was born because what really mattered, if it mattered at all, was when a person died. Then it was clear what contributions someone had made to society. What counted was what one had become, not what one was or could be.

It is not surprising, then, that many



people in the ancient world were thought of as mere objects that existed for the good of society. Infanticide — for example, Herod's killing of all the firstborn males — was common, though it more often took the form of neglect rather than direct killing.

Early Christians were vocal in their disgust at the pagan treatment of children. As gifts of God, children were to be cared for and loved, even those — like the physically deformed — who were rejected by the ancient world.

The creche Jason and Grandpa carved

Janaan Manternach/CNS

It was Dec. 1. Jason had been waiting for this day to arrive. Since he was 7 (three years ago), he and his grandfather had been carving a Christmas creche. They always worked on it as soon as December came.

Joseph, Mary, Jesus, a small crib, a lamb and a donkey already had been carved.

The donkey was special because it had carried Mary to Bethlehem with Joseph. While they were carving it, Grandpa told Jason how hard and long the trip had been, and that even though the donkey grew tired he carefully carried Mary, seeming to sense that the baby she was carrying was special.

Jason often held the donkey in his hands and thought about that long journey. He and his grandfather often had talked about the trip Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem, finding a place to stay, the baby's birth, the angels alerting the shepherds and the visit of the three kings. Jason loved hearing the story again while carving.

Each year Grandpa added something new to the story. It seemed that the figures they were whittling took

on a life of their own and told new things to his Grandpa, like how they had kept the baby warm with their breath and how they had kept very still so as not to awaken him.

This December they were going to carve the three kings, and Jason was eager to hear again about their journey from the East to Bethlehem. He knew the three kings located the stable where Jesus was born because a brilliant star guided them. Grandpa had promised they would carve a star to hang over the stable.

Jason hardly could wait to get home from school. He planned to eat a snack and take off to Grandpa's house. But while he ate, his mom stood by looking sad. Finally she said, "Jason, I know you're planning to go to Grandpa's to work on the Christmas creche. I know how much you've been looking forward to it."

"But things have been happening in Grandpa's brain, and he may no longer be able to carve like he used to. I know you've noticed that he doesn't remember a lot of things and often sleeps in his chair. Sometimes, too, he doesn't know what to do when you give him a high-five like the two of you always did."

"Jason, your grandfather has Alzheimer's, a disease that takes

So, instead of discarding the memory of these children who had been killed by Herod, the church celebrates their sacrifice with the Dec. 28 Feast of the Holy Innocents. It is a Christian contrast to the view that those who are young have no intrinsic worth.

The Nativity holds the promise of our future life with God. The birth of Jesus — fully human and fully divine, in an out-of-the-way town in humble surroundings, to a young poor Jewish woman — is significant because of its particularity.

The birthday of Jesus is the beginning of a journey that starts at the creche and ends in the cross and resurrection of Easter. And the Incarnation is a specific gift for each of us — a gift fulfilled in the complete sacrifice of God for us.

It is a gift that took place at a specific time and place for the benefit of specific persons.

It was not for "society," it was for you.

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away the memory and changes dramatically the way a person is. He is still Grandpa, and he loves you as much as ever, but he is no longer able to be like he was."

Tears welled up in his mother's eyes, and Jason, too, felt like crying. But somehow he knew that he and his Grandpa had to continue working on the creche.

Maybe his father could help. Maybe his art teacher at school would help. Jason also remembered that one of his Grandpa's brothers used to whittle.

But right now he had to go to Grandpa and get out the figures they already had carved. He had to see how much Grandpa remembered.

Grandpa was glad to see him and seemed to know that the day was special. Jason gave him a big hug and went down to the basement to get the box of figures. As he unwrapped each one, Jason placed it in Grandpa's hands, and a look of recognition spread over Grandpa's face.

Jason hugged him again and promised they would continue to create the greatest story the world has ever known: the Christmas story.

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