



He left open the  
tomb door.  
You'd think He  
was born in a barn.

followers of Christ meet at  
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*Sharing Jesus and the Journey*

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featured activities such as hauling heavy sacks of toys, eating pies, climbing chimneys, stuffing stockings and giving the best ho-ho-ho. The winner was 43-year-old David Broughton-Davis. "I'm not proud to admit my best event was eating three large mince pies," he said. "I just wish that event hadn't taken place before the chimney climb. It was hard on the stomach."

So is the way many believers seem to confuse the characteristics of Santa Claus with the nature and conduct of Christ, or his Father. To many, God is like the Sicilian Santa, hiding out of sight but watching intently, just waiting for us to make the wrong move so He can bust us. Instead of representing love and intimate concern for us, that God is aloof, angry and anxious to make us pay. In reality, our Christmas Father exemplifies giving, forgiving and a grace that recognizes our sin but takes away our guilt through the gift of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. We all know John 3:16, usually in the King James translation: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." But equally important is the little-known verse that follows. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it." And that's what Christmas is all about, salvation that began in a Christmas manger and ended in an Easter miracle.

But just like the Kensington Santa, the Christian Saviour is often the object of controversy and division. Some crave the light he wants to impart, and some cringe at the very idea. Jesus enjoys wide public support only when we focus on the trappings, traditions and trivialities of Christmas.

It's safe to focus on a Baby who makes no demands on our lives. Everybody can embrace the spirit of peace and goodwill toward men. And nobody complains when we emphasize charity, family and generosity. The trouble is, all of that is secondary to the true message of Christmas, which is that God himself came to be among us in human form and died for our sins, clearing the way for forgiveness and salvation.

Jesus is no Santa Claus. But for his followers, eternal life is in the bag.

*Rick Gamble*



Volume 33, Number 45

December 14, 2008

*Real help for real life*

## Christmas Father



This Santa knew who was naughty and nice, and he didn't need to check his list twice.

In December 2001, Sicilian police tracked Mafia fugitive Francesco Farina to an apartment in downtown Catania after five years of frustration. From his vantage point, Farina could keep an eye out for the cops but, day after day, he saw nothing out of the ordinary — just the usual school children, holiday shoppers and the street corner Santa who jollied people into the ho-

ho-holiday spirit.

So a few days before Christmas, the mobster decided to leave town. But just a stone's throw from his front door, Farina was surrounded by police, arrested without incident and hauled off to jail. It turned out that a team of surveillance police had been watching the fugitive for weeks. The officers took turns being Santa.

That same year, in Kensington, Maryland, St. Nick was nixed from the small municipality's Christmas celebrations. City council banned him from a tree-lighting ceremony when some residents complained about "a religious figure" taking part. Outraged, 50 Santas protested at City Hall, prompting a fight between those for and against Father Christmas. One Santa was arrested.

But in Newtown Wales the following year, St. Nick experienced a run of near-unanimous public support. More than 1,000 men and women did a four-mile race for charity, each of them dressed in full Santa suits, including white beards and black boots.

And though running wasn't one of the criteria, eight contenders were dressed in the same garb during a search for Great Britain's best Santa. Sponsored by Guinness World Records, the "Santathon"