



Prayer Before Studying Theology

Almighty God, who didst wonderfully create man in thine own image,
and didst yet more wonderfully restore him:

Grant, we beseech thee, that as thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ was made in the likeness of men, so we may be made partakers of the divine nature;

Through the same thy Son, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. Amen.

--BCP (1928) (from the Leonine Sacramentary)

Athanasius' Life and Works

Athanasius was born c. 295 in Alexandria, Egypt and received a classical education that must have included oratory (effective public speaking) and some exposure to philosophy (an elementary understanding of Middle Platonism). Athanasius seems to have had some exposure to ascetic and monastic leaders and was subsequently ordained (c. 319) by Alexander, the archbishop of Alexandria, serving as his secretary. He accompanied Alexander to the Council of Nicaea (325) and spoke against Arianism. Athanasius succeeded Alexander as archbishop of Alexandria three years later (328).

The church over which Athanasius assumed leadership was deeply divided and troubled.

- His leadership was questioned by a powerful martyrs' church (the Meletian schism, whose leader, Meletius, had been condemned at the council of Nicaea) that also had support among some ascetic leaders/monastic communities.
- Although Arius had been condemned at Nicaea, many influential people at the imperial court and in the church hierarchy were sympathetic to his ideas.
- Although the council of Nicaea had tried to resolve the emerging Arian controversy by imposing the word *homoousios* (of the same substance) to define the relationship between Son and the Father, many eastern bishops were suspicious of this because they thought it eroded the distinction between the Son and the Father and failed to respect the difference that defined the Son within the economy of salvation.

Athanasius' task then, was to

- build support among the moderate bishops for *homoousios* as a viable, agreed term
- show that the bringing to sinners of divine grace and salvation depended upon
 - a particularly close relationship between the Father and the Son

- the fully divine Word entering into and assuming the fullness of a human life, dwelling within it as a tabernacle and using it as an instrument to save and restore our human nature to God, so that we might become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Athanasius' career therefore oscillated between anti-Arian writings (which explored the nature of salvation and the preconditions for this) and dealing with ecclesiastical power politics (accusations against him by the Meletians and Arians, being banished five times from his episcopal see, spending a total of seventeen years in exile or hiding).

In 334-335, an attempt was made to rehabilitate Arius and restore him to communion and the ranks of the clergy (the Synod of Tyre in 335) and this received imperial support.

When Athanasius refused to comply, he was exiled to Treves (Trier, in southwestern Germany), which helped him to understand the theological situation in the West. After Constantine died in 337, Athanasius was able to return to his see, but was exiled again by the Synod of Antioch (339) and various other Arian bishops were imposed upon Alexandria. Athanasius took refuge at Rome where he was supported by Pope Julius I and reaffirmed as the only legitimate bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius was only able to return to Alexandria in 346, after the Arian bishop had died. When the emperor Constantius (who had protected Athanasius died in 350), his successor Constantius backed the Arians and had Athanasius condemned at synods held in 353 and 355, so that an Arian bishop could be imposed upon Alexandria. Athanasius at that point went into hiding for six years with the Pachomian monks of the Egyptian desert, writing various works and letters while on the run from the imperial forces. When Constantius died in 361 and the Arian bishop was murdered, the new emperor Julian the Apostate (who was a pagan) allowed all bishops of every theological persuasion to return to the city where they claimed an appointment, which created chaos. Athanasius held a synod in 362 in Alexandria to reconcile the divergent parties, but was subsequently exiled by Julian. When Julian died in 363, Athanasius returned to Alexandria, but was exiled a fifth time in 365 by Valens, another Arian emperor, who lived outside the city for four months to oversee developments. When the people of Alexandria threatened to revolt, he allowed Athanasius to return and was restored to office in 366. After this, Athanasius led a comparatively peaceful life, dying in 373.

Athanasius on the Incarnation

This work (composed 318 at Alexandria or 336 in exile at Treves?) follows after Athanasius' apologetic work *Contra gentes* (Against the Heathen Peoples), which attacked pagan religious beliefs and practices, which were still current in Egypt during that time. In that earlier work, Athanasius had criticized the worship of idols and the fears which had given rise to idol worship. Having shown the impropriety of pagan religion, Athanasius had then gone on to expound the Christian faith. Athanasius had argued that the Word, as the creative power of God, was fully divine and the origin and cause of all created things and moves these things in accordance with God's providence.

De incarnatione (*On the Incarnation*) continues this catechetical/apologetic project by exploring what it means for the Word to take on bodily form and become human to effect our salvation. Athanasius regards this as a unique belief that separates the faith of

Christians from that of Jews and pagans. Athanasius also contends that meditation on the Lord's human life is the best place to understand the real nature of his divinity (and the heart of love that guides divine action): "Thus by what seems his utter poverty and weakness on the cross, He overturns the pomp and parade of idols, and quietly and hiddenly wins over mockers and unbelievers to recognize him as God" (p.1). Taking up a human life is not something God is required or compelled to do; it is something that he freely wills and chooses to do.

There is, however, a fittingness in the Word doing this, because he comes to restore to God the very creatures he brought into existence: "The One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it at first."

Athanasius defends the idea of divine creation, providence and salvation against claims put forward by the Epicureans that God did not design the world into being, but that the elements in their motions brought all creatures into existence spontaneously. Athanasius argues that either

- (1) there would be a single element and all things would be identical with one another (which is not the case), or
- (2) there would be different elements in the world and spontaneity would produce a certain degree of randomness and not a world like our present world, whose parts are ordered and adapted to one another to bring forth new and complex functions (as, for example, we see in the parts of the body).

Athanasius also argues against the view, popular in Middle Platonism, that God created the world out of some pre-existent matter, which had always existed alongside God (as a second unoriginate principle, leaving God as a mere craftsman to order other things of the same type as best he can). Against this, Athanasius argues that what it is to be God is to be the cause of everything else, matter included; where this is true, God will have no limits or limitations, since there is nothing else like himself beside himself to impose such limitations.

Athanasius also considers the views of Gnostics (probably also including Marcionites), who attribute the creation of the world to someone other than the Father of Jesus Christ (taking from the Father even the title of artisan).

This goodness and order has its source in God's creation and redemption of all things by his Word. Upon human beings, he bestowed a further grace, giving an impress of his divine image and a share in his own divine reason, thus connecting human beings with the life and mind of God.

Since the nature of God includes the possibility of unrestricted choice, humanity is created with a nature free of corruption and capable of unending life in communion with God.

When the power of choice goes beyond the limits set by God (sin is closely connected with pride, which rejects and seeks to surpass all limits) and inclines away from God

toward evil, communion with God is broken. God's sustaining and life-giving power is therefore withdrawn and humanity becomes subject to corruption and death in a world which itself now shares in these defects.

The Incarnation of the Word is a divine choice made in response to our sorry state and aims to renovate

- our inner life which is turned against God (and even against our own humanity) by the corruption and distortion of our reason and
- our bodily life, which is subject to physical corruption and the lordship of death, so that we do not become corrupted entirely and return to nothing, but are instead restored to the love and service of God.

For Athanasius (as later for Basil and Augustine), God is the one who has (and gives) life, being, and love, so to fall away from God is to become depleted in love and to become ever less, a two-dimensional caricature of humanity in which the divine image is increasingly obscured. Over the course of a life, this makes one so much the less that bodily deterioration and death are sad yet fitting sequel to the inward dying that has already occurred in the soul.

Now if all that was required was to set right one single past act, an apology (repentance) might have been enough.

What an apology (repentance) cannot set right is the inward power of corruption that has lordship over us due to sin.

To accept an apology without breaking the inward power of sin and corruption would achieve nothing, since the human being would simply move on from that one act to other, even worse acts.

Furthermore, insofar as God has decreed that sin should be punished, to forgive one past act would simply set God's declaration of responsibility and forgiveness against one another, without fundamentally changing the relation of the sinner to the divine law (moving the sinner from a corrupt heart subject to judgment to a renewed heart made suitable for communion with God). Thus, in redemption the original purpose of the law is fulfilled (namely, that we be guided and brought to righteousness).

God does not desire the death of a sinner, but that he be turned from his wickedness and live. Through the incarnation, God aims to complete his purposes for human beings by restoring his image in them, returning them to the likeness of God and preparing them for everlasting glory in communion with himself (cf. p. 80).

Since the Word is the means by which God creates, bringing something from nothing, and gives life, it is natural that the Word should become incarnate to secure our re-creation and restoration to life (cf. the image of repainting the same image on the same material in pp. 41-42 and see further p. 78 [bottom]).

Furthermore, since the Word has an affinity and special connection with all that he has made, he can most appropriately enter into the fullest identification with our humanity by taking on himself the whole of our life and nature.

- "He deals with them as a good teacher with his pupils, coming down to their level and using simple means...Men had turned from the contemplation of God above,

- and were looking for Him in the opposite direction, down among created things and things of sense...He became himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body. When, then, the minds of men had fallen finally to the level of sensible things, the Word submitted to appear in a body, in order that He, as Man, might center their senses on Himself, and convince them through His human acts that He Himself is not man only but also God the Word and Wisdom of the true God." (p. 43-44).
- Cf. p. 44: "He stayed in His body and let Himself be seen in it, doing acts and giving signs which showed Him to be not only man, but also God the Word...At one and the same time—this is the wonder—as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father" (p. 45).

In his full identification with humanity, he fully bears also the totality of the sins that are ours. In this we see the fullness of the self-humbling of divine love and God's radical accommodation of himself to our need, which draws our hearts back to him in love and gratitude.

- "The body of the Word, then being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies liable to death. But the indwelling of the Word loosed it from this natural liability, so that corruption could not touch it...the Word..., being himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as His own in place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it might bring to naught him that had the power of death" (p. 49), so that Christians no longer die in fulfillment of the threat of the law (which Jesus bore and satisfied), but the impermanence of their bodies may still run its course, being brought down to nothing, so that we may receive in their place imperishable bodies (p. 50; cf. p. 81 [bottom]). Death has to precede resurrection (pp. 52, 57) and death and resurrection are by necessity public acts, by which God's work of renewal is made plain to all (pp. 52-53, 56).
- "Thus taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, when He had fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men.

This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might

become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself, remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection

It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for his human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required.

Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored" (pp. 34-35).

- "...He showed himself mightier than death, displaying His own body incorruptible as the first-fruits of the resurrection."
- "Mortal and offered to death on behalf of all as it was, it [sc. his body] could not but die; indeed, it was for that very purpose that the Savior had prepared it for Himself. But on the other hand it could not remain dead, because it had become the very temple of Life. It therefore died, as mortal, but lived again because of the Life within it; and its resurrection is made known through its works" (p. 62).

Once the image of God within us we are restored, we are able to see and know the Word, who is the first and best image of God, and through him to know the Father ("which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only happy and blessed life"; p. 38). See further p. 79 (middle).

Our reason, then, is made able to know divine Reason, the Word himself and can move beyond earthly things (and the descent into idolatry and behavior befitting beasts) to once again know heavenly and divine things and flourish.

See p. 60 (bottom)-61 (top), 62 (top), 63 (top), 74 (middle), 84 (top) on the present activity of the savior. "This is the reason why His works are no mere human works, but, both intrinsically and by comparison with those of men, are recognized as being superhuman and truly the works of God" (p. 87).