

Epiphany 3

Lessons: *de Incarnatione* 8; Philippians 2.5-11

Preached at evensong in the Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge

Athanasius – a deacon who, in 325, attended Alexander, patriarch of Alexandria, at the council of Nicea; the bishop of Alexandria, from 328 until his death in 373; befriended by Anthony of the desert, a significant early monastic figure, supported by many Alexandrian Christians, and yet exiled 5 times by his political and theological opponents; an uncompromising adherent to the belief that the Word, or the Son, of God was of one substance – *homoousios* – with the Father, and so an unrelenting critic of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, who argued that the Word, or Son, was a creature, albeit a very highly exalted creature.

He wrote numerous works – Festal letters, announcing to his people the date of Easter, and how best to prepare for its celebration; a tract, from which our first reading was taken, a tract which sought to explain why God's becoming man was essential to humanity's salvation; treatises strongly criticising the Arians' denial of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father; letters to Serapion, the bishop of Thmuis, arguing that the Spirit is very God – for since the Spirit sanctifies, and since only God, and not a creature, may sanctify, the Spirit must be very God; and 'historical' works, which though they contain numerous original documents, are, in fact, less historical works and more propaganda in Athanasius' own favour.

Clearly Athanasius did not write a systematic theology. He wrote to particular people, or, more often, against particular people and their ideas, as and when he deemed theological truth and ecclesial wellbeing demanded. Yet, for all that, we can tease out some of the main themes of his theology.

But where to begin? Let us take as a prompt the fact that this Sunday falls within the week of prayer for Christian unity, and then recall that it is often what people hold in common that leads to disagreement. As the late Eric Mascall once wrote,

the causes of Christian disunity are to be found in the agreements of Christians, rather than in their disagreements.

Both Athanasius and Arius, Athanasius' arch opponent, agreed over the doctrine of creation from nothing. Before them, most Christian thinkers, even those who used the language of creation from nothing, when trying to understand God's world, agreed that the fundamental distinction to be made was that between the spiritual realm and the material realm. Athanasius and Arius disagreed with their predecessors. Their understanding of the doctrine of creation from nothing compelled them to maintain that, if God created *all things*, and '*created all things from nothing*', the fundamental distinction to be made had to be made, not between the spiritual and the material, but between God and everything else, whether spiritual or material, between the One Creator and

all that is,
seen and unseen.

Inevitably the question then arose, into which realm, that of God or that of creation, the Word, the Son of God, should be placed.

Arius believed that in God there is no derivation, that God is 'without source'. He also believed that the Word had a source, namely God. And so he felt forced to conclude that the Word could not be very God, and must be placed in the realm of the creaturely – the Word, though very highly exalted, yet was a creature.

Not that this created a problem for Arius when it came to the matter of salvation. For he believed that God redeems by divine *fiat*. He forgives; he bestows life-giving grace.

But Arius' thinking did create a problem for Athanasius. Athanasius did not deny that God could have saved by *fiat*; but he did assert that saving by *fiat* was not expedient. And what, he argued, matters to a good God, what matters to a God who wills the very best for his creatures, is not what God can do, but what is best for humanity.

Divine *fiat*, Athanasius maintained, treats causes, but not effects. Forgiveness, for example, deals with sin, but not with the wages of sin, not with the consequence of sin, mortality and corruption. Divine *fiat* fails to 'internalise' grace, leaving human existence as, at best, but a sorry sequence of sin and forgiveness, followed by more sin and further forgiveness. Divine *fiat* does not transform matter. It does not, for example, engage with death. It does not assume mortal humanity; it does not transform a dying race into children of God, into inheritors of divine immortality and incorruption. And divine *fiat* does not bring humanity to participate in the life of God, to enjoy the eternal relationship of the Father and Son.

Arius, as I have said, chose to place the Word of God firmly in the realm of the creaturely.

Athanasius, however, chose to place him firmly in the realm of the strictly divine. For, for Athanasius, the Word redeems. And no creature can redeem; only God can.

Athanasius therefore chose to place him firmly in the realm of the strictly divine. The Word was the eternal Son of the eternal Father. Athanasius would not allow Arius' preconceived definition of divine simplicity to exclude the only begotten

Son from the Godhead. And, having chosen to place the Word of God firmly in the realm of the strictly divine, Athanasius was then further quite unwilling, on the grounds of Arius' preconceived notions of divine transcendence, to deny God's ability and willingness to become incarnate. Indeed, he not only accepted God's involvement in the material world, but actually insisted that, for humanity's sake, God did not simply come upon an individual, as God came upon the Old Testament prophets, but, in the language of the prologue of John's gospel, became flesh. So, he lived a life like ours. He was ignorant as we are. He suffered pain and death as we do, and all for humanity's sake, that frail, fallen humanity might be transformed. As Athanasius succinctly put it,

the Word became flesh that we might be made divine; he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father [*de Incarnatione* 54]

I hope that I have given you a flavour of Athanasius' thinking. But more, I hope that I have given you something to think about as we find ourselves in the midst of this week of prayer for Christian unity.

I suspect that Athanasius would wish us to note at least three points.

Firstly, Christian unity is to be understood as unity not only across space but also through time – Athanasius, a 4th century bishop, would wish to be seen, with us 21st century Christians, as part of the one, holy, catholic church.

Secondly, unity, being one with God and with all Christians, is a gift, a divine gift, a divine gift not to be possessed, not to be hoarded, but to be celebrated and shared – for did not Athanasius see salvation, the reconciled life in God, as such a gift?

And, thirdly, the structures of ecumenism, the structures which hold Christians together, structures such as the proposed Anglican Covenant, are to be treasured – for, as Athanasius remarks, matter matters to God; matter matters so much that God, the high and mighty One, stooped down, took it upon himself, and, in and through the cross, highly exalted it.

Athanasius *is* a 4th century voice. But he is also a 4th century voice which we may yet profitably hear and heed.

Amen.

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