The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.3

Opening Comments

Athanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and received a classical and theological education, likely in the catechetical school in Alexandria. He lived through four epoch-making events in the history of the Christian tradition. He experienced the last and greatest empire-wide persecution of the Christian community during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (303-312), during which Christians were to surrender all elements of worship, including Bibles and liturgical books, and to sacrifice to the Roman gods under penalty of death. This persecution was followed by the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312 and the edict of religious freedom in 313, culminating in the transformation of Christianity into a state religion in 324. This transformation necessitated a universal rule of faith sanctioned by power of the empire, in the form of dogma, as in the Creed of Nicea of 325. Athanasius was also a central figure in the development of the eremitic and monastic traditions that began in his day in the deserts of Egypt. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* would spread this ideal throughout the Christian world, as we see with Augustine of Hippo. Finally, Athanasius was a central figure in the Arian controversy, which broke out in Alexandria in 318 and divided the eastern Christian church until 381. Two concerns seem to motivate Arius. First, he shares with other Greek thinkers a concern that the Unoriginated God cannot be in direct contact with originated creation. The Son as the highest of the creatures would act as the mediator between the Unoriginated God and originated creation. Second, Arius had a profound aversion to the identification of the immutable and impassable God with the Christ who was crucified, suffered, and died.

Athanasius was ordained as a deacon by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, and accompanied him to Nicea in 325, where the teaching of Arius was originally condemned. Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria in 328, and spent the rest of his career opposing the Arians, and defending the highly controversial teaching of Nicea that the Son is "one essence (*homoousios*) with the Father." He paid dearly for this defense, as he was exiled five times from his diocese. The third exile (356-362), during which he fled to the desert, was his most productive theologically, as he wrote the *Life of Anthony* during that time (357), along with the three *Orations against the Arians* (358), which, along with his *Oration on the Incarnation* of 318, is his most important theological work. He was restored to his episcopacy in Alexandria after his fifth exile from 365-6, and spent his last years in Alexandria until his death in 373.

For Athanasius, the economy of salvation is rooted in the essential goodness of God. The goodness of God knows no envy, and hence God delights in bestowing God's goodness on creatures. "For God is

good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness, nor could one that is good be niggardly of anything; whence, grudging existence to none, he has made all things out of his own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord."[i] Because human beings are created out of nothing, we are also created mortal, like the rest of creation. However, God freely blessed humanity with a greater grace than other creatures by creating us in the image and likeness of God, by means of the Word and Image of God. "For God has not only made us out of nothing; but he gave us freely, by the grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God."[ii] God entrusted the grace of the image of God to us so that we might come to know God through his Son, the Image of God, and by this knowledge escape our own mortality and become united to God in eternal life.[iii] However, God also created us with free will, which can move toward the Word or away from it. God sought to help us to preserve the grace of the image by placing us in the garden under the command of the Word, and by threatening us with death should we disobey. In this way, we would know that eternal life would be ours on the basis of the grace of the image of God that had been freely entrusted to us, whereas our death would be due solely to our disobedience to the Word, based on our own free will.[iv]

Through the deceptive influence of Satan, human beings were freely diverted from contemplating the Image of God, which revealed to them the eternal goodness of God, and focused their attention instead on things closer to hand, beginning with themselves. Athanasius is thinking in particular of this verse from the Wisdom of Solomon: "for God created us for incorruption and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through an adversary's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it" (Wisdom 2:24). By turning their minds and wills away from that which is truly good to that which is apparently good, human beings conjured evil into existence, which had not existed before, because only goodness can come from God. We fell from the invisible God to the visible world, and this ignited lust in us for the pleasures of the visible world, as opposed to the blessedness of the Image of God. Because of our desire for created goodness, we also developed a profound terror of death, as death threatened to separate us from those good things we desire.[v] We also turned from the worship of God through the Word to the worship of gods we invented out of our own lustful imaginations. Athanasius sees an increasingly downward dynamic in this conjuring up of idols, beginning with the planets and the stars, descending to human beings, and finally falling to the worship of animals, plants, stones, and even demons as though they were our Creator. "So far indeed did their impiety go, that they proceeded to worship devils, and proclaimed them as gods, fulfilling their own lusts."[vi]

More alarmingly, once we turned away from the one who created us out of nothing, we turned toward nothingness itself, and began to plunge through the created world into the nothingness from which we were created, with nothing to halt our plunge. "For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time."[vii] By renouncing the grace of the image of God with which we had been entrusted, we became subject to the mortality that was essential to our created nature, and were on our way to returning to the nothingness from which we were created. "For this cause, then, death having gained upon men, and corruption abiding upon them, the

race of man was perishing; the rational man made in God's image was disappearing, and the handiwork of God was in the process of dissolution."[viii] Our lust for the apparent good things of this life also led us into conflict with other human beings, leading to murder and war, which intensified our descent into nothingness.

Our conjuring up of evil, and our increasing descent into nothingness, called forth the love and mercy of our Creator to try to lead us back to God, especially by sending Moses and the prophets. However, no revelation of God *outside* of us could reverse the trajectory we were on that was leading to our own complete annihilation. And since the annihilation to which we had subjected ourselves was also due to the curse of death that followed our disobedience to the Word, even our repentance would not be enough to save us from the power of death and nothingness, both because we owed God this debt of death due to our sin, and also because our repentance itself lacks the power to reverse our accelerating descent into nothingness.[ix]

God reveals the true depth of God's goodness and love by sending God's eternal Word to become flesh. Athanasius is at pains to show that God acted in Christ for our sake, for God had mercy on us, even though we were perishing under the power of death through our own fault. "Not for Himself then, but for our salvation, and to abolish death, and to condemn sin, and to give sight to the blind, and to raise up all from the dead, has He come."[x] Indeed, so great is the goodness and grace of God that God decided to become flesh to deliver us from death before God even created us. "For though the grace which came to us from the Saviour appeared, as the Apostle says, just now, and has come when He sojourned among us; yet this grace had been prepared even before we came into being, nay, before the foundation of the world, and the reason why is kindly and wonderful."[xi] God foresaw that we would turn from the Word of our own free will, and begin our plunge into nothingness, and so before we were even created in the grace of the image of God, the Image of God himself resolved to become flesh, to become the representative of all human beings subject to sin and death. God decided to restore us before God even created us, thereby revealing the depth of God's grace and love.

Athanasius sees Christ as the representative of humanity. The Word becomes flesh in order to take our place before God, so that he might take from us the sin, curse, and death under which we were perishing, and bestow upon us his incorruptible life, thereby restoring the grace of the image of God in us. "Whence the Word of God came in his own person, that, as he was the image of the Father, he might be able to create afresh the man after the image. But, again, it could not have taken place had not death and corruption been done away. Whence he took, in natural fitness, a mortal body, that while death might in it be once for all done away, men made after his image might once more be renewed."[xii] All of the things that Arius thought were unworthy of God—the suffering and death of Christ under the curse of God—show the depth of God's love and grace, for Christ is taking upon himself all that is destroying us, in order to annihilate it in himself once for all.

The grace of God is therefore revealed in what Christ alone does on our behalf, for the salvation of all.

"Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all." In particular, the Word carries out in himself the sentence of death that was pronounced against us, in order to put us to death once for all in himself, so that as the Word gives his flesh immortality in the resurrection, we might also be restored to eternal life by the grace of his resurrection.[xiii] "He sends His own Son, and He becomes Son of Man, by taking created flesh; that, since all were under sentence of death, He, being other than them all, might Himself for all offer to death His own body; and that henceforth, as if all had died through Him, the word of that sentence might be accomplished (for 'all died' in Christ), and all through Him might thereupon become free from sin and from the curse which came upon it, and might truly abide forever, risen from the dead and clothed in immortality and incorruption."[xiv]

Moreover, the work that Christ did for the salvation of all in his death and resurrection continues to be revealed by what he does now that he is risen. He shows that he is still alive by bringing idolaters to faith by invisibly persuading them to believe in him, and frees women and children from their terror in the face of death by the power of his triumph over death on the cross. "For the Son is 'living and active,' and works day by day, and brings about the salvation of all. But death is daily proved to have lost all his power, and idols and spirits are proved to be dead rather than Christ, so that henceforth no man can any longer doubt of the resurrection of his body."[xv]

Athanasius claims that the Word made flesh can act this way on behalf of all humanity because as the eternal Word of God he is over all of creation. Hence what the Word of God does for the salvation of humanity, he does once for all in himself. "For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death. And thus he, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection."[xvi] Because he shares our nature, what he does in himself is done for all of humanity, both in terms of delivering us from sin, death, and the curse, and in terms of deifying us by the union of our flesh with the Word of God.

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[i] *On the Incarnation* 3, p. 58.

[ii] *On the Incarnation* 5, p. 59.

[iii] *On the Incarnation* 11, 65.

[iv] *On the Incarnation* 3, 58.

[v] *Oration against the Heathen* iii.

[vi] *On the Incarnation* 11, 66.

[vii] *On the Incarnation* 4, 59.

[viii] *On the Incarnation* 6, 60.

[ix] *On the Incarnation* 7, 61.

[x] *Oration against the Arians* II.xx.55.

[xi] *Oration against the Arians* II.xxii.75.

[xii] *On the Incarnation* 13, 67-8.

[xiii] *On the Incarnation* 9, 63.

[xiv] *Oration against the Arians* II.xxi.69.

[xv] *On the Incarnation* 31,85.

[xvi] *On the Incarnation* 9, 63.