

**“He was in the world, and the world was made through him,
yet the world did not know him.” (St. John 1.10)**

This verse from the Prologue to John’s Gospel sums up a large portion of St. Athanasius of Alexandria’s famous treatise, *On the Incarnation of the Word*. In this relatively short piece of writing from the 4th century, Athanasius lays out a theological argument for why the Incarnation was necessary, but starts it right from the moment of Creation, since he argues that God made everything out of nothing through his *Word*, interpreted as his Spirit. By the Word, he gave humans life that reflects the grace of God, that is made in the image of God. But with the wasting away of that image by humanity’s sinful nature, he visited that earth in which he was always present. He saw all the evils of the world, and takes on a body of our own Nature, and that of a spotless Virgin, in whose womb He makes it His own, wherein to reveal Himself, conquer death, and restore life. St. Athanasius goes on to cover a lot of ground, and responds in advance to reasonably expected objections to his thesis, but he ends with the thought that Jesus lived a human life so that we might be restored to the perfection of creation as was always intended by God: that we can live freely, and to the fullest extent reflect the image of God.

In this exposition, he uses the same language that we hear today in the words of the Prologue to John’s Gospel: specifically that of ‘*The Word*’. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1). We understand through Athanasius, and as John says, the Word was always there with God. When God created the universe, he did so through the Word. He did not create the Word, for the Word always has been. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” John then refers to John the Baptist bearing witness to the coming light of God, and suggests that this coming light was the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us: Jesus Christ.

The use of the language of “word” in John’s prologue has come under much study through the years, but there is great consensus that there is a bit of a pun happening here. Not a play on words to be flippant, but a play on words to make a serious theological argument. The term “Word” we have in English comes to us from the Greek word “*logos*”. We can thus read it as, “In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God” and so on. This is significant because of the weight attached to the word *Logos* by the world of ancient Greek philosophy by this time. Plato and Aristotle had already defined *Logos* in far deeper ways than simply meaning “a word in a sentence”, but around the time of Jesus’ life, Philo of Alexandria gave the term a heavier *religious* weight. Philo was himself a Hellenized Jew, meaning his religious views combined aspects of traditional Judaism with some of the concepts of the Greek way of life, including philosophy and the Greek religion. Philo used the term *logos* to mean an intermediary divine being to bridge the gap between God and the material world. For Philo, the *logos* was the “first born of God” and the highest of these intermediary beings, and he identified the “Angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament as the *Logos*, which was God’s instrument in the creation of the universe. You can perhaps grasp what I mean when I say that *Logos* is a loaded term.

So, for John the Evangelist to write in his Gospel that the *Logos* became incarnate and took flesh, you can perhaps appreciate that he was really saying that Jesus *was* the pre-eminent Word of God that was always present at creation and was the instrument of creation. This is no small claim that this great force had now taken on flesh to be born a human being. As I discussed last night when looking at St. Luke’s account of the birth of Christ, Luke made sure the birth of Jesus was accounted for with precision. “It was not with the timelessness of myth that Jesus came to be born among us. He belongs to a time that can be precisely dated and a geographical area that is precisely defined: here the universal [, the cosmic,] and the concrete converge. It was in [Jesus] that the *Logos*, the creative logic behind all things, entered the world.”¹

This incredibly important act, say Ss. John & Athanasius, was not random, but was carried out by God for the sake of *redemption*, so that all the world might be rejoined to him in the order which he

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*

intended when the world first was created. The means of this redemption is presented in Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, when the angel visits Joseph and announces to him that the baby is to be called "Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1.21). Jesus, whose name *Jesua* means "YHWH is Salvation", has the primary task of forgiving sins, which is a lofty task, for only God can forgive sins. Thus, this child is immediately associated with God, directly linked with God's holy and saving power.

Theologian Joseph Ratzinger, who later served as Bishop of Rome, believes an illustration of the importance of this lofty task is presented in the story where Jesus is brought a paralytic man through the roof, because they could not get through the crowd. "The sick man's very existence was a plea, an urgent appeal for salvation, to which Jesus responded in a way that was quite contrary to the expectation"² of all present, for Jesus said, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2.5). "This was the last thing anyone was expecting", says Ratzinger, "it was the last thing they were concerned about". Those in attendance believed that Jesus had overlooked the man's real need. He didn't heal him, he only offered him forgiveness of sins.

In the passage, "both the criticism of the scribes and the silent expectation of the onlookers is acknowledged. Jesus then demonstrates his *ability* to forgive sins by ordering the sick man to take up his pallet and walk away healed. At the same time, the priority of forgiveness for sins as the foundation of all true healing is clearly maintained."

Ratzinger summarizes: "Man is a relational being. And if his first, fundamental relationship is disturbed – his relationship with God – then nothing else can be truly in order. This is where the priority lies in Jesus' message and ministry: before all else, he wants to point man towards the essence of his malady, and to show him – if you are not healed *there*, then however many good things you may find, you are not truly healed." This was how Jesus was to save the world: through the forgiving of sins, because this was the root of all problems on the earth. So, while we may perhaps think this is not a relevant detail, it is the most important detail: Jesus, YHWH is Salvation, came to save us from the power of sin. The Word of God, the *Logos* of creation, took on flesh so that God's grace might be extended to us all, that God himself might be extended to us all.

I draw on this very particular detail, of course, because of what we are about to do in a few moments' time. It is a great joy that Henry Jack will shortly be brought to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism here on Christmas Day, because he will be receiving the grace of God in reassurance that YHWH *is* Salvation. I will read in a few minutes at the very beginning of the ministration how baptism is an assurance that God will wash away our sins, for we believe this Sacrament marks all who receive it as members of the household of God, now and forever. All who are baptized, many through their parents and godparents, promise to renounce the devil and all his works, and affirm the Christian faith, which includes the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. The Waters of Baptism represent to us the eventual and constantly-working grace of God which is always flowing over us to wash away our sins, to complete Jesus' mission on earth, to assure us of God's salvation. Truly, what better day to affirm the saving power of the Incarnation than to witness a baptism than on the day of its commemoration.

So may we all be reminded of the waters of baptism which flow over each and every one of us, this day and forevermore, and give thanks to God for the grace which he has freely extended to each of us in the Incarnation of the Word. May the image of the cradle with a tiny baby be to us who see it a reminder of the amazing actions of God in the world: a reminder of an infinite, eternal creator who took on human flesh so that we might be loosed from the bondage of sin and live towards the promise of eternal life. And while we are faced with this mystery, let us reflect upon it, and the supreme love that made it possible.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Amen.

² Ratzinger, continued.