

THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD OF GOD

Athanasius of Alexandria

Everybody is by nature afraid of death and of bodily dissolution. Before the divine sojourn of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised his body, death is no longer terrible. The marvel of marvels is that he who is enfolded in the faith of the cross despises this natural fear, and for the sake of the cross is no longer cowardly in face of it.

All those who believe in Christ tread death underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch and bound hand and foot so that the passers-by jeer at him.

How can you think otherwise, when you see men naturally weak hastening to death, unafraid at the prospect? . . . If you see with your own eyes men and women and even children welcoming death for the sake of Christ . . . how can you not realize that Christ himself gives the victory to each, making death powerless?

No one in his senses doubts that a snake is dead when he sees it trampled underfoot, especially when he knows how savage it used to be. If one sees boys making fun of a lion, does he doubt that the brute is either dead or completely bereft of strength? It is the same with the conquest of death.

But if anyone finds this insufficient, let him find proof in present facts. Dead men cannot take effective action; their power of influence on others lasts only till the grave. Deeds and actions that energize others belong only to the living. Well, then, look at the facts in this case. The Savior is working mightily among men. Every day he is invisibly persuading numbers of people all over the world, both within and beyond the Greek-speaking world, to accept his faith and be obedient to his teaching.

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THE WORK OF ONE WHO LIVES

Can anyone, in the face of this, still doubt that Christ has risen and lives, or rather that he is himself the Life? Does a dead man prick the consciences of men so that they throw all the traditions of their fathers to the winds and bow down before the teaching of Christ? If Christ is now inactive in the world as he must needs be if he is dead, how is it that he makes the living to cease from their activities—the adulterer from his adulteries, the murderer from murdering, the unjust from avarice, while the fornicator becomes chaste and the profane and godless man devout?

This is the work of One who lives, not of one dead; and more than that, it is the work of God. We are agreed that a dead person can do nothing; yet the Savior works mightily every day, drawing men to faith, persuading them to virtue, teaching them about immortality, quickening their thirst for heavenly things, revealing the knowledge of the Father, inspiring strength in the face of death, manifesting himself to each and displacing the irreligion of idols.

**From one of
the all-time
Christian
classics comes
this vivid
explanation of
the way God
became man**

IT BECAME THE TEMPLE OF LIFE

No room for doubt remains, therefore, concerning the resurrection of his body. Indeed, it would seem that he who disbelieves this bodily rising of the Lord is ignorant of the power of the Word and wisdom of God. If the Savior took a body to himself at all, and made it his own in fulfilment of his purpose—and he did—what was the Lord to do with it, and what was ultimately to become of that body upon which the Word had descended?

Mortal as it was, and offered to death on behalf of all, the body could but die; indeed, it was for that very purpose that the Savior had prepared it. 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.

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Some may ask, why did God not manifest himself by means of some other, nobler part of creation than mere man — such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air? The answer is this: The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. He put himself at the disposal of those who needed him and did not vitiate the value of his appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.

It was not things nonexistent that needed salvation, but man—man already in existence and already in process of corruption and ruin. It was natural and right, therefore, for the Word to use a human instrument and by that means unfold himself to all. And how could the Lord have been proved to be the Life at all had he not endued with life that which was subject to death?

Take an illustration. Stubble is a substance destructible by fire, which has the natural property of consuming it. But suppose that, instead of merely keeping the fire from it, somebody soaks the stubble with a substance such as the Indian asbestos is said to be—an antidote to fire and without fear of being burned? The stubble no longer fears the fire, because it has put on that which fire cannot touch and therefore it is safe.

TURN FROM FIGHTING TO FARMING

It is just the same with regard to the body and death. The body puts on the Word of God and therefore fears neither death nor corruption any more, for it is clad with Life as with a garment, and in it corruption is done away.

The barbarians of the present day are naturally savage in their habits, and as long as they sacrifice to their idols they rage furiously against each other and cannot bear to be a single hour without weapons. But when they hear the teaching of Christ, forthwith they turn from fighting to farming, and instead of arming themselves with swords, they extend their hands in prayer. Instead of fighting each other, they take up arms against the demons and overcome them by their self-command and integrity of soul.

Who, then, has done these things and has united in peace those who hated each other, save the beloved Son of the Father, the common Savior of all, J  sus Christ, who by his love underwent all things for our salvation?

HE WILL COME IN MAJESTY

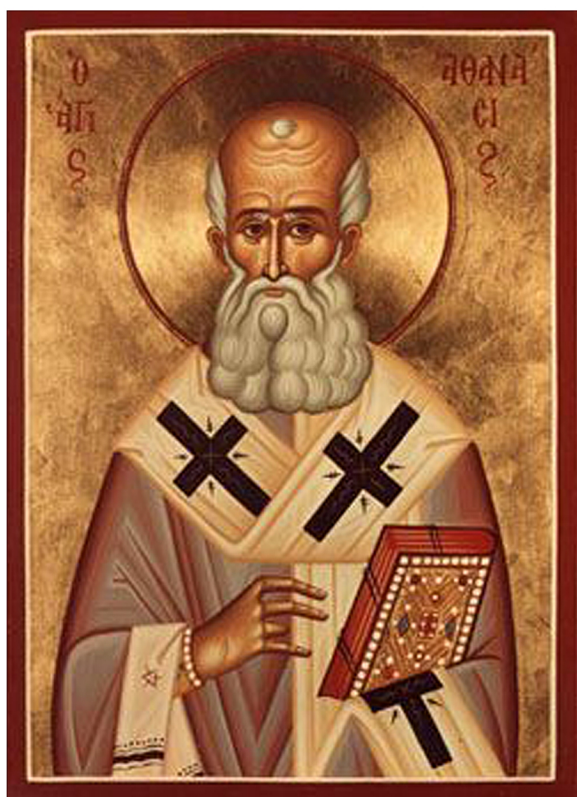
He indeed assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive

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the mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality. In short, such are the Savior's achievements that to try to number them is like gazing at the open sea and trying to count the waves.

This will give you a beginning, and you must go on to prove its truth by the study of the Scriptures. They were written and inspired by God; and we, who have learned from inspired teachers who read the Scriptures and became martyrs for Christ, make further contribution to your eagerness to learn.

From the Scriptures you will learn also of his second manifestation to us, glorious and divine indeed, when he shall come not in lowliness but in his proper glory, no longer in humiliation but in majesty, no longer to suffer but to bestow on us all the fruit of his cross, which is the resurrection and eternal life.



■ *Athanasius (296-373) is one of the great heroes of the church. Exiled five times by the Roman emperor, attacked by strong unorthodox parties in the church, this bishop of Alexandria maintained a strong Biblical faith which was finally vindicated. For a while the opposition was so intense that it was literally 'Athanasius contra mundum' (Athanasius against the world). His most famous treatise, 'De Incarnatione Verbi Dei,' was composed while he was still in his early twenties. This excerpt is taken by permission from 'The Incarnation of the Word of God,' English tr., The Macmillan Company, 1946.*

Jesus People

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