

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day  
December 25, 2014

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We hear again the Christmas story as a help to our devotions and observance of the Birth of Christ. But there is a bonus. The familiar and loved story also helps us understand Divine Providence and how it works. Seemingly unrelated events and different personalities are all elements of the drama. There is the census of Caesar Augustus. Joseph's lineage is connected to the poll tax. There is the Lord's conception, (which we annually observe nine months earlier at the Annunciation.) There is the age-old prophecy that Messiah will be born in the City of David. In the town itself there is an over-booked inn. In the nearby fields there are shepherds watching their sheep. All these different characters and elements lead to Bethlehem. We see how various lines of action, each free and independent, converge to serve God's purpose.

The universe is like that because God is Who He is and He made it. There is an over-riding will. Divine will works to its end not by destroying human freedom but by penetrating events and using them. It was through our human freedom (even the blunders and sins and rebellions) that the work of God moved to the birth of Christ.

Fallen humanity does all it can to defeat the ends of God. Yet on a certain night in Bethlehem of Judaea, the Light of God overcame human darkness. A girl named Mary gave birth to a New Person Who is also *the oldest of all Persons*. This baby looking up at His mother is also co-eternal with the Ancient of Days! Learning to say that would come later. But these thoughts are far away from that night in Bethlehem.

We look back and see Divine Providence in the interweaving of various independent strands that lead to this stable behind the over-crowded inn. But the event itself, this Divine birth, was a quiet one. The world cannot be blamed for not heeding the birth of Christ. In His Incarnation, Almighty God chose to avoid the world's notice.

Although the gospel tells us the events leading up to the birth of the Saviour, it does *not* give us details of Jesus' birth. Unlike Hollywood movies, the Gospel allows some things to be left behind closed doors! Saint Joseph probably summoned a local midwife and then stayed out of the way. The ministrations of

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angels held the Holy Family in love, but there was no outward mark of their presence. But my-o-my did things change dramatically when Jesus was born! Those angels could be kept out of human sight no longer. In one blazing hymn of ecstatic joy they lit up the sky in near pandemonium. And this was seen by the shepherds tending their flocks. What would the birth of Christ have meant as the spark of intellectual revolution had Greek and Roman philosophers witnessed that angelic outburst? We know it didn't happen that way.

God's final approach to mankind for the purpose of redemption took a quiet way of simplicity and humbleness. After the angelic demonstration the shepherds paid their respects to the family and then went back to their sheep. It is a way we would not have thought the best path for God to follow in the purpose of rescuing us from our sins. It didn't begin well. But God is God and we are not, *and it happened His way.*

His way is in the stable where the baby was lying in Mary's arms and Joseph was standing close by. There was no speculation about the world consequences of the event. There was no conversation about world politics or great movements of thought. We can be wise only *after* the event and *in response* to it. We know that the Incarnation was the only important event in world history. Behind it is no list. There is no second place. Lying in a cattle-feeding trough in this stable was the One invincible power of the universe, *the love of God in the flesh*. All else will fail. But "love never faileth."

Even this is saying something too abstract for Christmas and the stable where "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Mary looked into the face of her Son as any human mother. Through the eyes that smile back into Mary's beautiful face Almighty God looked out on a world of sorrow and pain and sin and hate that He has come to redeem, and for the redeeming of which He will die. God has come, and *this is the way He has come.*

"And this shall be a sign unto you" said the angel to the shepherds. "You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger." Here on Christmas in

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the night is the supreme example of the providential government of our world by its Creator Who is our Almighty God and Saviour Jesus Christ.