

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day
December 25, 2018

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Last night we had as our Christmas Gospel the wonderful account of the Birth of Christ as told by Saint Luke. Only two people (and maybe a midwife) were present for that birth. The shepherds, alerted by angels, came later. By tradition there were also animals present. (In almost every crèche collection you can spend nearly as much money on the many animals as on the central figures!) The story itself is a wonderful mix: angels, shepherds, the Holy Family, an innkeeper to whom tradition has been unkind, and the animals. We wonder in amazement at the Birth of God Incarnate in such circumstances. But even before St Luke wrote his account, Christ's followers marveled at and contemplated the *unspeakable love* which prompted Almighty God to enter His creation to save us from our sins.

The great apostle Saint Paul is seldom at a loss for words! But when Paul tried to put into words how and why God could *dispossess* Himself of His heavenly power, wisdom and glory, and become a baby, all the apostle could say was that God "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (*Philippians 2:7*) At Christmas, the majesty beyond words or thought, the splendor of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, was completely dependent upon the mercy of His creatures. Yes, God "emptied Himself." That is all St Paul could tell the Philippians.

By tradition the *Prologue*, or opening of Saint John's Gospel, is also especially associated with the Christmas liturgy. It is called "The Last gospel" when it is read at the end of Mass. By the time St John took up his pen he and the rest of Holy Church had been celebrating the observance of Birth of Christ for many years. Saint Luke's material (likely obtained directly or indirectly from the Blessed Mother) was familiar to, and loved by, St John. He did not need to re-tell that information in his own gospel account. Saint John wrote the *Prologue*. It is the high-water mark of the Church's, reflecting upon those great events of the Birth of the Saviour, great events which brought St Paul to a loss for words.

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." That is what St. John wrote. There are no shepherds or cattle or a manger here. To fathom the mystery of the Incarnation St John took a different approach. He knew any word is poetry. It is a living thought clothed in language. The Divine Word of God was always God's

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Son. And God is pure Spirit. But when *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. Mary and Joseph, were told to name the Divine Word *Jesus*. At Christmas the Word was clothed in our language, and He opened to us the experience of a spiritual world that had been foreign to us.

Perhaps you have traveled to a great foreign city where you did not understand the language. The street signs, shops, and trolley schedules were all a mystery to you. Then someone came along to be your interpreter and put the local language into your own language. Suddenly the possibilities of the city were open to your experience and enjoyment. That is what happened when Christ was born. As a result of the Incarnation, devoted followers of the Lord were thinking along those lines. And among them St John gave us *The Prologue*.

We all love the account of St Luke. In church school pageants the girls all wanted the role of Mary. The boys were angels or St Joseph. Everyone dreaded being the narrator and having to pronounce “Quirinius, Governor of Syria.” How would you even stage *The Prologue*? There are no cattle, shepherds, and cranky innkeeper here. But St John gets right to the heart of things. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*. Thanks be to God!