

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day
December 25 2019

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Any man or woman aspiring to be a licensed lay reader might dread having as the final exam Matthew 1:1-17. Remember that there are *two* stories and not just one in the gospels telling of Christ on the road. We all know and love the story of the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. But Matthew 1:1-17 is the *other* story and it is *not* beloved. That is because it is hard to get excited about a bunch of names difficult to pronounce! Here are the *begats*: the genealogy of Jesus Christ beginning with Abraham. This is the other story of Christ on the road, coming to us through the long years of preparation. And the good news is not that our Lord had an impeccable pedigree and lineage. Most of these folks in the begats were certainly not saints! The great point of the genealogy of Christ is that these men and women form the story *God wanted to enter*.

That thought recurs when you consider the artistic flair of the Campagna region in Italy, in its embellishment of the Christmas creche. They got it right. One of the magnificent displays is the annual spread in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. What you see is a great feast for the eyes. Your eye is attracted quickly to all the lively and busy scenes portrayed all around the Bethlehem creche. You notice that very few of the figures seem to be paying any attention to what is going on in that manger scene.

There is laid out everything connected with daily life and people going about their business. There were boys fishing, old men playing checkers, a butcher shop with prosciutto and chickens hanging from the beams, women drying laundry, all sorts of people talking, laughing, and arguing. The only way to find the creche and the Holy Family is because the impressive camels and wise men are heading in that direction! The total scene is a reminder that it is into this life, all there is to life, that Our Lord Jesus came.

A kindergarten teacher once told of having brought a far simpler creche to her classroom. But even her set had cows and donkeys and sheep and shepherds and wise men. She opened the box containing the creche and unwrapped each piece and set it in place. The children grew in excitement with the unwrapping of each piece. But all of a sudden one little boy shook his head in disapproval and said "where does God fit in?" Somehow the assembling of the creche did not remind him of God. Even the little figure in the manger didn't look like God to the boy. I wonder how this little boy would have reacted to the far more extravagant display at the Met!

Where does God fit in? Well, He fits in to the most difficult places: difficult not to of course, but because the places God goes are where we don't think He belongs. The gospel assertion is that Almighty God desired to insert Himself into our tiresome and often exhausting journey through life. And that genealogy, with all the difficult names to pronounce, tells us God is Emmanuel, GOD WITH US. Christ Jesus joined us on the road, which is the only place we can be, but where we were walking in circles until He moved us onto the straight path towards the house of praise and joy.

Where does God fit in? All those new space telescopes with their remarkable infrared photos of flaming ghost nebula force us to revise our conceptions of the hugeness of the universe. And, whenever we do that, we have to revise also our meager earthbound conception of the glory of God. Christmas is the reminder that this magnificent God wills to be a part of our ordinary lives. The glory of God, the praises of Whom were and are sung beyond the starry constellations by the angelic choir, appears and takes His place as a baby that looks so ordinary. Because the extraordinary has become ordinary! And the bustle of life goes on around just as portrayed in those magnificent creche scenes.

Where does God fit in? He crafts the high flaming nebula of outer space. But after men and women began to know Him on earth His presence was often noticed in a clap of thunder, then in a mighty wind, and finally in a still small voice. Then one day He came as a little baby thing Who was a real boy, Who grew to become a real man, Who died a real death, and Who was raised from the dead and revealed by the glory of God to be Son of God with power.

Here is the greatness of God! Here is the Almighty! We call Him that because He holds all the powers of Heaven and earth in His hand just as you might have held the steering wheel in your hand driving to Church. And yet in a rough cattle shed in the darkness of the night, on a particular day, was contained a joy deeper and denser than human hearts had ever known. For the first time since the catastrophe in the Garden of Eden the eyes of man looked upon God. For Jesus, our God, was here.

He has fit in where we don't think He belongs. We can never fathom His glory and His greatness. All we can do is in fact what we do: we come, we kneel down, and we adore our Savior and our God.