

Easter 5C

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

May 2, 2010

Acts 11:1—18 Psalm 148 Revelation 21:1—6 ***John 13:31—35***

COMMEMORATION OF ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Today's message is going to be a departure from the norm. Today I'd like to talk to you about the person who the church commemorates on this day every year.

In addition to our regular church year calendar of seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, along with the various festivals – the church also commemorates the witness of exemplary Christians throughout church history. The date on which we commemorate these notables of the faith is always the date of their death, which becomes their “heavenly birthday.”

“Lutherans have always understood that there is great benefit in remembering the saints whom God has given to the Church. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Article 21) lists three reasons for such honor. First, we thank God for giving faithful servants to the Church. Second, through such remembrance our faith is strengthened as we see the mercy that God extended to the saints of old. Third, these saints are examples both of faith and of holy living to imitate according to our calling in life.”ⁱ

The person whose life and witness we commemorate today is Athanasius of Alexandria. Athanasius was born in 293, and died on May 2, 373.

It seems especially appropriate that we talk about Athanasius today when we hear today's Gospel reading. Hear again the words of Jesus: “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.”

We hear these words, and perhaps we don't think much of them. We might hear this and think, “Well, of course God will be glorified in Jesus, and Jesus will be glorified in God, because God and Jesus are one.” In academic terms, this notion is called the *communicatio idiomatum*, the “sharing of attributes,” which helps describe the relationship between the two natures of Jesus: both God and human.

But at the time of Athanasius, explaining exactly how Jesus was both God and man was a hot-button topic. Following the Edict of Milan in 313, when the Emperor Constantine de-criminalized Christianity, for the first time these hot theological debates could come out into the open.

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Athanasius seems to have been theologically precocious from an early age. There is a story told that the bishop Alexander had invited a number of fellow bishops to meet him at breakfast after a great religious function. While Alexander was waiting for his guests to arrive, he stood by a window, watching a group of boys at play on the seashore below the house. He had not observed them long

before he discovered that they were imitating the elaborate ritual of Christian baptism. He sent for the children and, in the investigation that followed, it was discovered that one of the boys (none other than Athanasius), had acted the part of the bishop, and in that character had actually baptized several of his companions in the course of their play. Alexander determined to recognize the make-believe baptisms as genuine, and decided that Athanasius and his playfellows should go into training in order to prepare themselves for a clerical career.

It was early in his career when, as a deacon and secretary to the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius attended the Council of Nicea in the year 325. The Emperor Constantine called this council of all the bishops in order to settle several theological arguments, the most contentious among them being the relationship of Jesus to God the Father.

There was at that time in Alexandria a very popular presbyter, or elder of the church, named Arius. Arius had been teaching that the Son of God did not always exist, but was created by God the Father – and is therefore distinct from and inferior to God the Father. “Having a genius for propaganda, Arius set his favorite slogan to a popular tune, and soon half of Alexandria was singing, 'There was a time when the Son was not.'”ⁱⁱ This theology became known as Arianism.

It has been said that, “Of all the various disagreements within the Christian Church, the Arian controversy has held the greatest force and power of theological and political conflict, with the possible exception of the Protestant Reformation. The conflict between Arianism and Trinitarian beliefs was the first major doctrinal confrontation in the Church after the legalization of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine I.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Constantine was very troubled by the squabbling amongst the theologians of the church. He feared that such arguments would fracture the church. But he also feared that this quarreling would jeopardize his own plans for the empire. Constantine wrote that his plan from the start had been “to bring the diverse judgments formed by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition ... of settled uniformity,” and “to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world.”^{iv}

Why put all this at risk by fighting about abstract, technical questions that nobody could answer with real certainty? One side said Christ was “begotten”; the other said “created.” One declared him “divine by nature” and the other “divine by adoption.” To Constantine, these differences were essentially trivial. He said that Christian thinkers should imitate the Greek philosophers, who had tolerated disagreements far more profound than this without calling each other devils or organizing factions to suppress each other's opinions. He believed the adversaries

should reconcile and permit their emperor once again to enjoy “trouble-free days and nights of repose.”^{v, vi}

Constantine therefore decided to call the first ecumenical council of the church, in May 325 in Nicea, in order to settle a few things, chief among them the Arian controversy. But he puzzled over the “procedure to be followed at the council. Public discussion should not be avoided, of course, but acrimonious debate was as likely to harden positions as to change them. Working together on a proposed creed, however, might provide the bishops with the chance to listen more closely to each other, forge new connections, and, perhaps, discover language that they could agree on. Previous councils had promulgated statements of faith... Perhaps creed-making at Nicaea could bring ecclesiastical harmony out of discord.”^{vii}

Of course, we all know one of the results of the Council of Nicea: The Nicene Creed. Of special note in relation to the Arian controversy is the first portion of the Second Article:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

At the Council of Nicea Arianism was officially declared heresy. However, Arian thought lived on.

Athanasius spent the remainder of his life championing doctrinal orthodoxy. It is for this reason that he was declared a “Doctor of the Church.” His fellow Church Doctor, Gregory of Nazianzus, said: “When I praise Athanasius, virtue itself is my theme: for I name every virtue as often as I mention him who was possessed of all virtues. He was the true pillar of the Church. His life and conduct were the rule of bishops, and his doctrine the rule of the orthodox faith.”^{viii}

The Eastern Orthodox churches sing a hymn to Athanasius. It reads:

O Holy father Athanasius,
like a pillar of orthodoxy
you refuted the heretical nonsense of Arius
by insisting that the Father and the Son are equal in essence.
O venerable father, beg Christ our God to save our souls.

The contributions of Athanasius to our understanding of Jesus as not only the Son of God, but God incarnate, cannot be underestimated.

Arianism was only the first of many heresies regarding the nature of Christ faced by the early church. In just a few weeks – on May 30th, Holy Trinity Sunday – we will recite the Athanasian Creed in our worship service. This creed was not written by Athanasius, but it is named for him because of Athanasius' pioneering work in formulating doctrine on the nature of Christ as both God and man.

In conclusion today, I'd like to read the prayer for the commemoration of St. Athanasius... Let us pray...

Uphold your Church, O God of truth, as you upheld your servant Athanasius, to maintain and proclaim boldly the catholic faith against all opposition, trusting solely in the grace of your eternal Word, who took upon himself our humanity that we might share his divinity; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

<1,577 words>

- i *The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod: Commemorations*. <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=867>, downloaded 5/1/10.
- ii William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 73.
- iii *Arianism*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arianism>, downloaded 5/1/10.
- iv W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 636. Quoted in Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harcourt, 1999), 49.
- v Rubenstein, 50.
- vi Frend, 497.
- vii Rubenstein, 72.
- viii Cornelius Clifford, “Athanasius” in *Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 2* (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1930), 35-40.