

## Reflection Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> Week Easter St Athanasius 2023

**Saint Athanasius** (295 - 373) was born in Alexandria. He assisted Bishop Alexander at the Council of Nicaea and later succeeded him as bishop. He fought hard against Arianism all his life, undergoing much sufferings and spending 17 years in exile. He wrote outstanding works to explain and defend orthodoxy.

Athanasius's passion for the truth seems tactless to many today, some Catholic devotional works even express embarrassment over it. The matters in dispute with the Arians were more important than any of our scientific questions today. They were vital to the very nature of Christianity, and, as Cardinal Newman wrote, the trouble at that time was the laity tended to be champions of orthodoxy while their bishops (seduced by closeness to imperial power) tended not to be. Henry Chadwick claims that the whole issue became tangled up with matters of power, organisation and authority, and with cultural differences between East and West. Athanasius was accused of treason and murder, embezzlement and sacrilege. In the fight against him, any weapon would do.

Arianism taught that the Son was created by the Father and in no way equal to him. This was in many ways a "purer" and more "spiritual" approach to religion, since it did not force God to undergo the undignified experience of being made of meat. Islam is essentially Arian, granting Jesus a miraculous birth, miracles, death (though not crucifixion) and a resurrection, but all as a matter of God demonstrating his power by committing more spectacular miracles than usual.

Arianism leaves an infinite gap between God and man, and ultimately destroys the Gospel, leaving it either as a fake or as a cruel parody. It leaves the door open to Manichaeism, which mixes Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Gnostic elements into Christianity, so that God is good but creation is bad (or at worst, a mistake) and the work of an evil anti-God. Only by being orthodox and insisting on the identity of the natures of the Father and the Son and the Spirit can we truly understand the goodness of creation and the love of God, and live according to them.