

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

“*O magnum mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum,*” and so forth, goes the verse from the “Roman Breviary” for “the Matins of Christmas.” The complete verse could be translated: “O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger! O blessed virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!”

That verse has for years been sung as a plainsong chant, but others have composed choral music for it such as the 20th century motet by Morten Lauridsen. His composition, which has been played in years past by our Zion brass, communicates the awe-filled words in hauntingly beautiful music.

If you can include just one other thing in your Christmas celebrations this day, go out to YouTube on your phone, tablet, or computer, look up “O Magnum Mysterium” by Morten Lauridsen, and listen to it. I like the King’s College version, but pick one and ponder the words. “O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger! O blessed virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!” As it does me, it may move you to tears.

“O great mystery” goes the verse, and what is this mystery? That the LORD Himself, He who gave His name to Israel of old, the “I AM” by whose mighty power Israel was rescued from Egyptian slavery, He would humble Himself to be born to such circumstances, surrounded by animals, laid in a manger. The mystery is that the Lord would condescend to be born of the virgin’s womb.

I admit, Christ’s birth as the child of Mary, conceived of the Holy Spirit, is a miracle. And Christ’s example of humility is a marvel — that in the words of St. Paul, “*Christ Jesus, ... though he was in the form of God,*” that is, fully God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, “equal to the Father with respect to His divinity” as we confess it (Athanasian Creed, 31), “*did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil. 2:5b-7). Or as we confess it: He “was made man” (Nicene Creed). And when it comes to His humility, St. Paul says, he wasn’t done: “*being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8).

Miraculous and marvelous, but may I offer? ... Christ’s humility is not a mystery. That is not something that I can’t wrap my mind about. I don’t think it is for Paul, either. Otherwise, why would he say to us: “*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 2:5)? Lutherans are right: the way of humility is the way of Christ-likeness; but humility is not a mystery.

On the other hand, the incarnation itself, God Himself becoming flesh, the fact that Jesus “is at the same time both God and man,” that “He is [true] God, begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages” and also true “man, born from the substance of His mother in this age: perfect God and perfect man” (Athanasian Creed, 28-30) ... that is a mystery. It is, along with the mystery of the Holy Trinity, one of the two greatest mysteries of the Christian faith.

And the how of this fact — “*that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*” spoken by the angel to Joseph (Matt. 1:20) — that is, the miracle that effected this mystery — “*How WILL this be, since I am a virgin?*” ... “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*” (Luke 1:34-35) — doesn’t really answer the question: “How CAN this be?”

Indeed, that’s not a question that can be answered. How can it be that Jesus is both true God and true man at the same time? How can immortal God also be mortal man? How can God, who is incapable of suffering, suffer and die? How can this perfectly free Lord of all be simultaneously a perfectly dutiful servant of all? The answer can only be confessed. And what that answer is becomes clear only with much theological wrangling over several centuries.

As in the opening words from the Gospel of John it begins with the person of the Son of God, the eternal λόγος, the Word of God. Who is He? John tells us: He is God. He is distinct from the God we call Father, for the Word was “with” or “toward” God, but He is at the same time God, and was with God the Father in the beginning when “*God created the heavens and the earth*” (Gen. 1:1). The Word participated in the creation of all things and continues to preserve them. He Himself is not made, but everything that has come to pass, came to pass through Him. The Word, John says, was the source of life; He is the light of men.

The Word is not some lesser god; there is but one God, and He IS that “*only God,*” but He is “*the only God, who is at the Father’s side,*” who makes the Father known. As Jesus would say later in John: “*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him. ... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*” (John 14:7, 9). Or as Matthew records: “*no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*” (Matt. 11:27).

So, this is what we confess, Jesus IS the one God; He is the second Person of the Trinity, the eternally begotten Son of God; He is all those things we confess in the Nicene Creed — “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.” He’s “of one substance with the Father”; and this is the personhood of the Christ.

But we also confess that the Word of God “*became flesh*”; that is, He “came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and

was made man” (Nicene Creed). He didn’t just appear to be a man, but instead was really a phantasm. He didn’t come down from heaven and inhabit a man born in a natural way. He wasn’t flesh without a human will or soul or spirit. All these and more are false teachings about Jesus and His incarnation that the church had to dispel; the correct teaching is that there really was a “personal union” of man with God and God with man.

Jesus was fully human, “composed of a rational soul and human flesh” as we confess. He had a human nature, but was not a separate human person. Nor did He convert His “divinity into flesh,” but assumed the “humanity” He received from His mother into His divine Person (Athanasian Creed, 33).

What a mystery! Do you understand it? I don’t. But with you I do confess it, and I confess that the Word of God came down from heaven and became flesh “for us men and for our salvation” (Nicene Creed). We may not be able to understand the mystery of the Divine person of Jesus, but we can understand that this was necessary for our salvation. I’ve quoted the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nazianzus often, but I’ll do it again without apology. He wrote: “that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved” (“Critique of Apollinarius and Apollinarianism,” Epistle 101, earlychurchtexts.com).

What was united to the Son’s Godhead in the incarnation was mankind, and therefore, mankind is what is saved by Jesus’ person and work. That’s what God effected by the Word becoming flesh with us — flesh so that He could suffer and die, but God so that His righteous blood shed might be a sufficient ransom payment for the sins of the world. This was God’s purpose: to save us miraculously, marvelously, mysteriously.

But let us not gape in speechless awe at the mystery of the Word made flesh. Let us not concern ourselves with the “How can this be?” Let us raise our voices in unceasing praise of Him begotten of the Father’s heart, Him who assumed our mortal body, doomed to die, Him who was raised to life and endless glory, Him who gave birth to our salvation, Him who stoops down to serve us today with the mystery of His body and blood for our forgiveness, life, and salvation.. Let us confess His name and sing His praises “evermore and evermore.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.