After the Council of Nicæa (A.D. 325), the followers of the doctrine of the arch-heretic Arius made a special effort to have Saint Athanasius removed from his see at Alexandria and exiled to a distant city. They realized that he was a capable man, burning with ardent zeal for the teaching of Nicæa, i.e., that Jesus, the Word incarnate, was fully divine, equal (“one in being”) to the Father. Before we consider further controversies in which he was involved, it would be wise to consider how Athanasius’ theological convictions about Nicæa were based on his general understanding of Christian doctrine.

An excellent opportunity for this is provided by an early treatise which he wrote, not as part of a controversy with other Christians but as a presentation of Christian doctrine to win over pagans and Jews. This treatise, one of the few which he wrote that is not part of his defense of Nicene doctrine, is entitled On the Incarnation [= the becoming-human] of the Logos [= the Word of God]. Actually it is the second part of a longer work intended to convince pagans and Jews to become Christians. The first part is his treatise Against the Heathens, which shows how unreasonable is the worship of many gods, but the second section, On the Incarnation of the Word, is more important for our purpose. While a precise time of composition is difficult to establish, a plausible date would sometime between suggests A.D. 325-328. At this time the controversy with Arius and his followers seemed to have been settled at Nicæa, and the deacon, Athanasius, was surely being considered as a possible successor to Alexander, the patriarch of Alexandria, in Egypt. Our author may well have been eager to show his suitability for the position.

Athanasius begins On the Incarnation of the World with a brief summary of some points already expressed in the first part. The order of the universe, he says, shows that it is the work of an Artisan acting through reason. Plato, “who is admired among the philosophers,” conceived of this Artisan as introducing order into matter not produced by himself. Such a teaching, says Athanasius, attributes a certain weakness to God, as though he needed the help of someone or something else to provide him with matter on which to work. Rather this primordial Artisan must have the power to bring
into existence the very matter on which he works; in other words, he must have made the universe out of nothing, not out of what previously existed. Its rational order shows that he has made it through his Logos (= Word or Reason), which is his Son. In creating man, God made him “after his own image” (Gen 1.26), to the point of giving him a share in the power of reason, a kind of reflection of the wisdom of his Son (On the Incarnation of the Word, chapters 1-3).

Thus human beings, although made out of nothing and hence by nature liable to slide back into nothing, through the reason implanted in them by the Word are provided with the means to escape corruption: “For God has not only made us out of nothing, but he gave us freely, by the grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God” (chapter 5). To guide them through this crucial test, he gave them a law: they must not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; otherwise “dying you shall die” (Gen 2.17). This consequence, our author says, was not arbitrary, for evil is something negative, a lack of good order and reality. By choosing evil they themselves have chosen corruption and death (chapters 3-5).

Athanasius then pictures God as faced with a kind of dilemma:

For it would be unfitting, in the first place, that what God said should prove to be false—that, when he had ordained that man, if he transgressed the commandment, should die the death, after the transgression man should not die. . . . On the other hand, it would be unfitting that creatures once made rational and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin and turn again to non-existence by way of corruption. . . . It was then out of the question to leave human beings in the current corruption, because this would be unseemly and unworthy of God’s goodness.

chapters 5-6

The only one capable of providing a remedy for this situation is the Word of the Father, his Reason, which is his Son. In creation it was he who put the original order into the universe, endowing material human beings with the power of reason, which would enable them to escape corruption and death. He alone should be able to recreate everything and suffer as an ambassador on behalf of everyone before the Father (ibid., 7). To do this he would need to take to himself a human body:

For the Word perceived that the corruption of mankind could not be undone except by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word, being immortal and Son of the Father, to
undergo death. So he took to himself a body which could die, so that it [this body], by partaking of the Word, who is above all, might be worthy to die in the place of all, and might, because of the Word which has come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible and that thenceforth corruption might be averted from everyone by the grace of the resurrection. And so, by offering unto death as a sacrifice the body he had taken, straightway he averted death from all his peers by the offering of an equivalent. For, being above all the Word of God, by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument [i.e., his body] for the life of everyone, he naturally satisfied the debt by his death. And thus he, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with everyone by a like [human] nature, naturally clothed everyone with incorruption by the promise of the resurrection.

chapter 9

From this we see that the redemption of the human race is at the core of Christian doctrine as conceived and taught by Saint Athanasius. In fact our redemption is presented throughout the New Testament as “the good news,” the key point of the Christian message, as, for example, by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.1-4. In his works Athanasius keeps pointing out that our Redeemer must be human like us if he is to act on our behalf, and divine like his Father if his sacrifice is to be acceptable to God.

Essentially the same reasons given by Athanasius for the Incarnation of the Son of God turn up again about 770 years later in a work composed by Saint Anselm of Canterbury: Why God Became Man. Anselm presents a little more explicitly that what pleased the Father most in the sacrifice of the Cross was not just his Son’s suffering, but especially his Son’s love. Perhaps this could be understood as implicit in Athanasius’s treatise.