



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 24th & 25th, 2010

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Four hundred years or so before the event we are celebrating today, a very smart man – possibly the most intelligent person who has ever lived – concluded a long investigation into the question: Does God exist?" The man's name was Aristotle and his conclusion was: "God does, indeed, exist, but he is so different from us that it would be necessary for him to reveals himself to us for us to know anything about him."

Aristotle's idea set the intellectual world ablaze. Scholars at the great universities of the Ancient World – Athens, Rhodes and Alexandria – set up altars to Aristotle's unknown God. In the 12th Century of our Christian era, St. Thomas Aquinas – a man arguably as bright as Aristotle, himself – elaborated on these concepts and propounded them in a manner that still today vitally engages intelligent and inquiring minds.

St. Paul adopted Aristotle's theories about the unknown God as an important teaching tool when he took the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the scholars who dominated intellectual life in the gentile world of his time. Arriving at the University of Athens, he pointed to the altar dedicated to Aristotle's god. "Men of Athen's," he said, "I see you have an altar to the Unknown God. I can now reveal him to you in the person of Jesus Christ."

The Book of Acts tells us that Paul's statement

immediately engaged the interest of the Athenian scholars and sparked an intense debate. While some scholars embraced the Christian faith as a consequence of Paul's preaching, many rejected it. They thought it quite ridiculous to imagine that a God so powerful and mighty he created "heaven and earth and all that is therein" would reveal himself to mankind in the form of that most helpless of creatures – a weak and feeble human infant.

Moreover, they found it equally difficult to credit the notion that God would sacrifice his own life – by crucifixion, the most ignominious of all methods of executions – to save people he, himself, had created from the consequences of breaking the very laws he had made for their own good. Why not simply create more satisfactory people?

There are, of course, many highly intelligent people who hold the same opinions today. After all, God's plan for the salvation of mankind simply doesn't make sense in human terms. Confronted with such disobedience and disregard, the human response would usually be: "Find me the guilty man. Bring him here, and chop off his head without delay. If he is a really nasty fellow make him suffer intensely before he dies."

Don't fool yourself into thinking this would not be a natural response. It doesn't matter if you

are a Christian, an agnostic or an atheist. The sole reason you, personally, might feel inclined to be a tad more merciful than most of your ancestors is the cultural effect of almost two millennia of intensive Christian conditioning.

But this ignores Aristotle's astute observation that God, by his very nature, is so utterly different from ourselves that the only way we can know him or recognize him is for him to reveal himself to us. And, when all is said and done, who could be more different from an ordinary run of the mill human being than Jesus Christ.

Jesus is entirely without pretensions. Intellectually speaking, he is head and shoulders above everybody he associates with, yet he doesn't lose patience with them or patronize them. All of his thoughts and actions are aimed at helping other people. He never uses any of his extraordinary powers to help himself. Even when nobody else is around, he refuses to use his power to turn a stone into bread to satisfy his raging hunger.

God's most important revelation to us is that he is love: not simply that he is, by nature, loving, but that he is actually love, itself. But, then, when one thinks about it, this is an essential characteristic for a trinitarian being. Only three absolutely loving persons – the very essence of love – could comfortably share one nature.

When he created us, God gave us the gift of free will. It is difficult to figure out quite why God made us that way. But, clearly, it's the way he wants us. And, by his very nature, he loves us despite the daft, willful and wicked things we freely choose to do.

If he were to intervene in our lives every time we were about to do something bad or when something bad was about to befall us. He would deprive us of our free will – the very essence of our humanity. The result would be that we would have no choice but to obey his every command. And this would defeat his whole purpose for creating us. For just as he loves, he wants us to love him, and love

compelled is not love at all.

When one pauses to consider his solution to the problem, it is really quite astounding. He took on our human nature not as a king, a high priest or a mighty ruler – a person human beings would choose to be if they were God. Instead, he came as a helpless baby. That he came as a baby is on the surface of things surprising, but, in fact, it should not shock us. The altruistic and all-embracing love we find in our families is the nearest on earth we can get to divine love we encounter in the Trinity. It made him feel at home

And when you come to think about it, it was perfectly logical that he should choose to be born to an ordinary, nuclear family – neither rich, nor poor, but simply middle class – and in the most unpretentious of surroundings. God doesn't need to be pretentious. He is, after all, God. You can't get any higher up the totem pole than that. Nor should we be surprised he continued in the same unpretentious way as he started. His disciples were all ordinary people, who – while occasionally addressing him as "Lord" – frequently treated him as though he was by no means entirely in touch with the mother ship.

He conducted himself in such a modest and unassuming manner that people often had difficulty reconciling who he was with the way he behaved. He used his extraordinary powers in a surprisingly casual, understated way – as though healing the sick and raising people from the dead was an entirely natural thing to do. "Kid, get up," he would say, or, "Lazarus, come out of there." On the other hand, such things would be quite natural to God, wouldn't they?

This brings us to the true wonder of Christmas. It is not the miracle of the Virgin Birth – a piece of cake for God; a mere technical detail for the Creator of the Universe. No the true wonder of Christmas is this: "So God loved the world," writes St. John, "that he gave his only begotten Son to end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *AMEN.*