



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Hero's Journey 3: To Hell and Back

Sermon for Good Friday, April 14, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42; Psalm 22

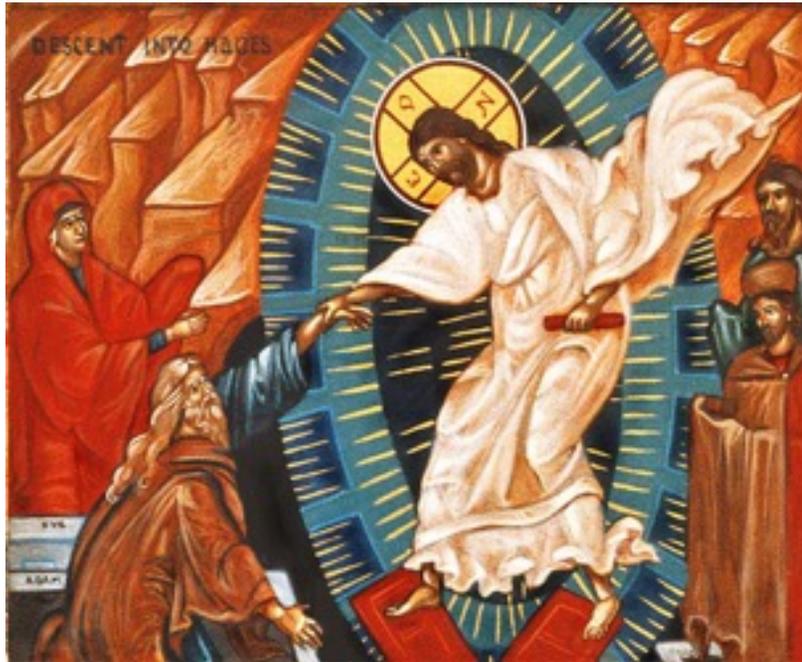
Sermon text: Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:11-12

They put Jesus' body in the garden tomb hard by Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. But Jesus was not laid to rest. His work was not yet done. He had hell to harrow.

The Harrowing of Hell—are you familiar with this story and doctrine? It is not often preached on, perhaps because we Anglicans, unlike the Orthodox, do not typically have a Holy Saturday service before the Easter Vigil in which this would be the appropriate homiletic focus. But rather than speak another word on the Seven Last Words of Jesus or add my two cents to Christ's immeasurable sacrifice for our sins on the cross, let me share some thoughts—and quote at some length from a theologian and a poet—on the topic of Christ's descent to the dead.

The scriptural warrant for the doctrine codified in the Apostles Creed (“he descended to the dead”) is provided by 1 Peter 3:18-20: “For he [Christ] was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey.” And 1 Peter 4:6: “For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.”

The doctrinal implications of Christ's descent to the dead were developed by the early Church Fathers, in particular a number of theologians based in Alexandria, a major see of the early church. Prominent names include Clement, Origen, Athanasius and,



especially noteworthy in this respect, Cyril of Alexandria. Permit me to quote extensively from a compelling article by the Metropolitan of Moscow, Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev.¹

“The doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades occupies an essential place in the works of Cyril of Alexandria. In his ‘Paschal Homilies’, he repeatedly mentions that as a consequence of the descent of Christ into Hades, the devil was left all alone, while hell was devastated: ‘For having destroyed hell and opened the impassable gates for the departed spirits, He left the devil there abandoned and lonely.’”

What a wonderful image: hell empty of people, and the devil left there abandoned and lonely!

The harrowing of hell is the turning point of Christ’s salvation work of descent and ascent:

“As the last stage in the divine descent (*katabasis*) and self-emptying (*kenosis*), the descent of Christ into Hades became at the same time the starting point of the ascent of humanity towards deification (*theosis*). Since this descent the path to paradise is opened for both the living and the dead,

which was followed by those whom Christ delivered from hell. ..

We do not know if every one followed Christ when He rose from hell. Nor do we know if every one will follow Him to the eschatological Heavenly Kingdom when He will become ‘all in all’. But we do know that since the descent of Christ into Hades the way to resurrection has been opened for ‘all flesh’, salvation has been granted to every human being, and the gates of paradise have been opened for all those who wish to enter through them. This is the faith of the Early Church inherited from the first generation of Christians and cherished by Orthodox Tradition. This is the never-extinguished hope of all those who believe in Christ Who once and for all conquered death, destroyed hell and granted resurrection to the entire human race.”

¹ Quoted in Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev: “Christ the Conqueror of Hell, The Descent of Christ into Hades in Eastern and Western Theological Traditions,” a lecture delivered at St Mary’s Cathedral, Minneapolis, USA, on 5 November 2002; available online at <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/11/1/5.aspx>.

So an Orthodox doctrine of universal salvation based on Christ's descent to the dead can be supported by extensive biblical and patristic authority!² Alfeyev comments on the contrast with traditional Western, particularly Roman Catholic, doctrine, summed up by Aquinas and his complex city of the dead:

“There is no need to discuss how far the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on the descent of Christ into Hades is from that of Eastern Christianity. No Father of the Eastern Church ever permitted himself to clarify who was left in hell after Christ descent; no Eastern Father ever spoke of unbaptized infants left in hell. The division of hell into four parts and the teaching on purgatory are alien to Eastern patristics. Finally, this very scholastic approach whereby the most mysterious events of history are subjected to detailed analysis and rational interpretation is unacceptable for Eastern Christian theology. For the theologians, poets and mystics of the Eastern Church, the descent of Christ into Hades remained first of all a mystery which could be praised in hymns, and about which various assumptions could be made, but of which nothing definite and final could be said....This kind of legalism was alien to the Orthodox East, where the descent into Hades continued to be perceived in the spirit in which it is expressed in the liturgical texts of Great Friday and Easter, i.e. as an event significant not only for all people, but also for the entire cosmos, for all created life.”

So there Aquinas (whom I love, but here I agree with the Orthodox critique). Let me conclude by reading a wonderful poem by the poet Denise Levertov (1923–1997). Levertov was born in England, daughter of a Welsh mother and Russian Hasidic father, who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest. The poet herself converted to Christianity at the age of sixty, and joined the Catholic Church 6 years later. She had emigrated to the US many years earlier and taught at Stanford and other places, writing many books of poetry and essays. An amazing poet.

In this poem Levertov assumes the Catholic position that only the righteous dead will be saved—which as we have heard is not the only or most orthodox of Christian interpretations of the harrowing of hell. But the Levertov poem is also about Christ's return to the tomb, to wounded flesh, and to his friends on earth. It is titled “Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell.”

Down through the tomb's inward arch
He has shouldered out into Limbo
to gather them, dazed, from dreamless slumber:
the merciful dead, the prophets,
the innocents just His own age and those
unnumbered others waiting here
unaware, in an endless void He is ending
now, stooping to tug at their hands,
to pull them from their sarcophagi,
dazzled, almost unwilling. Didmas,

² For a Protestant defense of this also based on Christ's descent to the dead see Gary Amirault, “The Harrowing of Hell” at [tentmaker.org: http://www.tentmaker.org/articles/harrowing_of_hell.htm](http://www.tentmaker.org/articles/harrowing_of_hell.htm). On different grounds, a recent defense of universal salvation from popular megachurch founder and speaker Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (2011). In the Roman Catholic tradition Hans von Balthazar is associated with the argument that God's mercy will triumph over human wickedness; see *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?: With a Short discourse on Hell* (great title)

neighbor in death, Golgotha dust
still streaked on the dried sweat of his body
no one had washed and anointed, is here,
for sequence is not known in Limbo;
the promise, given from cross to cross
at noon, arches beyond sunset and dawn.
All these He will swiftly lead
to the Paradise road: they are safe.
That done, there must take place that struggle
no human presumes to picture:
living, dying, descending to rescue the just
from shadow, were lesser travails
than this: to break
through earth and stone of the faithless world
back to the cold sepulchre, tearstained
stifling shroud; to break from them
back into breath and heartbeat, and walk
the world again, closed into days and weeks again,
wounds of His anguish open, and Spirit
streaming through every cell of flesh
so that if mortal sight could bear
to perceive it, it would be seen
His mortal flesh was lit from within, now,
and aching for home. He must return,
first, in Divine patience, and know
hunger again, and give
to humble friends the joy
of giving Him food—fish and a honeycomb.

Isn't that a lovely closing image: Jesus back with his humble (and forgiven) friends sharing a meal of "fish and a honeycomb." He stayed only for a short time, and appeared to not all but only some. God moves in mysterious ways.

He will be back, some day. Maybe trailing of glory and surrounding with conquering hosts of angels, settling scores and so on. But if so, then I suppose to make sense of this Holy Saturday story he will have to return once again to the land of dead, to the damned, and offer once again, a hand up.

Won't you take his hand now? Won't you share his body and blood offered at the feast of his table?

In Christ's name, Amen.

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