

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (April 29, 2012)

The **new translation** of the liturgy of the Mass has raised a question for some about the meaning of the affirmation in the Apostles' Creed that Christ "*descended into hell.*" The translation we had been using from the early 1970s said that "*he descended to the dead.*" Prior to that, the word had always been "hell". That was the way it was when I learned the creed as a child.

In the early church, the word **hell** did not have as precise a meaning as it came to have later. It corresponded to the Hebrew word **Sheol**, the name given by the Bible to the realm of the dead, to a world of shadowy figures to which everyone, good and evil, was reduced after death.

In the New Testament, there are a number of somewhat enigmatic sayings that suggest that Jesus, after his death and before his resurrection, descended to Sheol to proclaim there the good news of salvation. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul applies a phrase from a psalm to Christ that speaks of him ascending on high. He then adds: "*to say he ascended means that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth.*" 1 Peter says that Christ, having died, "*went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah.*" Referring to the same incident, Peter later adds: "the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead."

On the basis of these and other texts, there grew up a conviction that between Jesus' death and his resurrection, his human soul, united to the divine Word, entered the world of the dead and announced to the just of the Old Testament that the **time of their waiting** was fulfilled, that the way to paradise, to eternal life in God, was now open to them.

Some of the Fathers of the church sometimes described the event in highly imaginative terms. Christ was said to have encountered the powers of evil and darkness and to have destroyed them and in doing so to have liberated those whom they held in prison. What he did came to be known as the "**Harrowing of Hell.**" Illustrations of the event show the triumphant Christ trampling the doors to the underworld and leading up from it Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah,

David and other Old Testament figures.

The point that such ideas and images were trying to make was that the **road to salvation** opened up by the life and destiny of Jesus **is for all**. It embraces not only those who lived in his time or who would come after him and respond in faith to the gospel, but also those who lived before him and in some way looked forward to his coming. With time the number of the just came to include not only those who were part of the biblical tradition but **people of good will** everywhere. In regard to them, theologians spoke of implicit faith in Christ.

The language of **ascending and descending** reflects a time when the world was thought of as flat and the heavens above as the realm of light and of God and what lay beneath the surface of the earth as a place of darkness and of evil. What, however, is being affirmed in the Creeds of Christ and of salvation in Christ is not tied to such a world view.

Because of the way in which hell has come to be identified as the **abode of the damned**, of those who have freely and definitively rejected God and his grace, the Catholic Catechism declares that “Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.”

If this is the traditional understanding of the descent of Christ, more recently a number of theologians and mystics have seen it as a continuation and deepening of Christ’s descent into the **mystery of human suffering and death**, into radical loneliness and the experience of the absence of God that for many seems to be a strange byproduct of our culture.

The pain of hell is ultimately a pain of loss, of separation, of alienation from that for which we are made - light and truth, beauty and goodness, and for the one who embodies them all to the ultimate degree, God. By plumbing the depths of such an experience, Jesus is able to touch and in some way to heal or bring hope to the most painful forms of human loneliness and abandonment. Here he enters into solidarity not only with the dead and the dying but even with those who are

caught up **in spiritual death**.

The present pope, writing some years ago, describes “Jesus’ descent into Sheol” as “the **night of the soul**. a night no one can observe except by entering his darkness by suffering faith.” We are invited in our suffering and in our fear of death, the pope says, “to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the night. One draws near to the Lord’s radiance by sharing his darkness.”

The statement in the Creed about Christ descending into hell is followed immediately by the affirmation that “*on the third day he rose again from the dead.*” In the New Testament, the resurrection is ordinarily attributed to the Father. Christ, having emptied himself to the point of death and beyond, is raised by God to the fulness of life. He is, as Paul puts it, “the first fruits of those who have died. As all die in Adam,” he explains, “so all will be made alive in Christ.” His descent into death and among the dead opens for us and for all the possibility of ascending with him to eternal life in God.