

THE DESCENT INTO HELL

Both the Bible and the Creed confess that Christ died. But the meaning of this confession extends far beyond what may be observed through human empirical experience. As Father Karl Rahner, S.J., observes "the Bible includes in the affirmation of his death the further assertion of his descent into hell."¹ This latter assertion appears to describe an event which took place between the death and resurrection of Christ. This in turn places it at the very heart of the work of redemption between the cross and the empty tomb. As such it is professed in the Apostles Creed, was believed in the primitive Church,² and is contained in Sacred Scripture.³ Our concern here is not with the act of faith whereby we assent to the proposition that Christ descended into hell but with the doctrinal content of that proposition.

I was asked to discuss this doctrine in terms of I Peter 3: 19-20 which refers to Christ's proclamation "to the spirits who were in prison," and I Peter 4-6 which speaks of the gospel being "preached to the living and the dead." For reasons that will soon become apparent, I believe that it is imperative to approach the problem from a different point of view. It should come as no surprise to find the ordinary manuals of dogmatic theology of little help here. A casual glance through any of them reveals a genuine poverty of matter on this question. This may be due to the fact that few of them give anything like "a fundamental consideration of the mysteries of Christ's life in general."⁴ However that may be, it is my personal

¹ *On the Theology of Death*, tr. C. Kenkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962) p. 65.

² Cf. Saint Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 9:2; Saint Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 72-99; Saint Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chap. 20, n. 4 and Book 4, chap. 22, n. 1.

³ Cf. P. Benoit, O.P., "La Descente aux Enfers selon W. Bieder," in *Exégèse et Théologie* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1961) vol. 1, 412-416.

⁴ K. Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations*, tr. C. Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961) p. 11.

persuasion that the intelligible content of the mystery will best appear within the framework of "salvation-history."

The major facts of the history of salvation are, as Father Daniélou, S.J., observes,⁵ events which, although they occur but once, change forever the course of spiritual history by introducing a new factor into the relation of man with God. In the Old Testament, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant of Sinai, the election of David, were events of this kind. In the New Testament, all things that happened in the life of Christ "from the baptism of John until the day He was taken up from their midst, were also events of this kind. But it is precisely within the complex of the Paschal Mystery, at the center of the new economy of salvation, that the descent of Christ into hell has meaning both for himself and for those before whom he appeared.

The fact of Christ's death is clearly contained in Sacred Scripture.⁶ Just as his appearance for forty days after his resurrection was proof that he really rose from the dead, so too the three days that his body remained in the tomb was proof that he really died. And just as his resurrection was more than a proof that Christ lived, so too the burial was more than a proof that Christ died. Even though the body of Christ was not to see corruption (Acts 2: 27-31), still for three days it was deprived of life, separated from its soul, and even though hypostatically united to the Word, it could in all truth be called a cadaver, a dead body. So besides being an incontestable proof that Christ passed through an authentic state of death, the burial of Jesus indicates the extreme limit of the Word's emptying of himself for our salvation.

However, from the moment Christ said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," a problem arises which, in his day, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, formulated in these words: "It becomes us to ask how Our Lord distributed himself into three places at once: into the bowels of the earth, as he told the pharisees: into the paradise of God, as he told the good thief: and into the hands of his Father,

⁵ Cf. *The Lord of History*, tr. N. Abercrombie (London: Green and Co., 1958) pp. 183-202.

⁶ Cf. P. Benoit, *loc. cit.*

as it is said here.⁷ Any discussion of the descent of Christ into hell in terms of *place* will be as unsatisfactory as an interpretation of his ascension in terms of *space*.⁸ At the moment of Christ's death a change took place in his soul which cannot be understood merely in terms of local movement. For from the moment his soul was separated from his body it became fully glorious and triumphant.⁹ Just as it is now quite acceptable to speak of an invisible and a visible ascension, so there is no good reason why we may not speak of an invisible and visible glorification. Thus, Christ's prayer on the cross, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," would be answered the moment he began his passage from this world to the next. In this way the first fruit of Christ's redemptive sacrifice would be the plenitude of divine life with which his soul was endowed at the moment he "bowed his head and died." And as Christ was then *with the Father*, so, too, the good thief would be *with Christ*, for by the words he addressed to Dismas, Christ effected a transition from the Jewish hope of paradise to the Christian hope of union with Christ: "You shall be with me." And so too, now, today, *hodie*, at this moment, Christ was also with the soul of the just who were waiting in *sheol* for the inauguration of the messianic kingdom.

The soul of Christ was glorified at the moment of his death and, in this condition, he appeared in the midst of the souls of the just. His appearance was for them an event of profound significance which was to effect their status immediately and for all eternity. They had been waiting to claim an inheritance which was theirs by right but

⁷ *First Sermon on the Resurrection of Christ*, PG, vol. 25, col. 410.

⁸ Here we are applying to the mystery of the descent of Christ into hell the observation P. Benoit, O.P., made in regard to the mystery of the ascension: "*ces réflexions sur le mode de l'Ascension suggèrent une dernière et bien utile leçon. Elles nous invitent à ne pas grever ce mystère d'imaginaires plus ou moins fragiles sur la constitution de ce monde, et en particulier à ne pas le lier d'une façon nécessaire et compromettante—aux vues d'une cosmologie ancienne et périmée.*" In "L'Ascension," in *Exégèse et Théologie* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1961) I, 408.

⁹ "*après la mort, l'âme du Christ, dégagée des liens du corps et ayant achevé de mériter, est pleinement glorieuse et triomphante, elle est vivifiée, la vie glorieuse s'épanouit en elle.*" J. Chaîne, "Descente du Christ aux Enfers," in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de Bible*, vol. 2, 418.

which up until now they had been powerless to take possession of. So between his death and resurrection Christ descended into hell and brought to the souls of the just the efficacy their grace lacked in order to lead them to God. Saint Thomas sees this activity of Christ in hell as deliverance of these just men from the *reatus poenae* due to original sin and the healing of the *defectus communis* affecting human nature as such and consisting of physical death and deprivation of the life of glory.¹⁰

This life of glory was theirs as soon as Christ appeared in their midst. For from the moment he died, salvation for the just who preceded him was consummated, their redemption was achieved. And so now, today, *hodie*, they were with him and he was with them. And there seems to be no good reason for saying that the souls of the just had to wait two days,¹¹ or forty-two days,¹² before entering into the kingdom of heaven. If heaven is conceived of as a place and the possession of the beatific vision as a state, then it might be possible to distinguish the entrance into one from the possession of the other. But as soon as we refine the local metaphors that we are forced to use in speaking of the next world, it seems as though they are saying nothing more or less than that the possession of God in the beatific vision is what we call heaven, at least essentially. Even in this context, the soul of Christ would still be the first human soul to enter heaven and to possess the glory and happiness of heaven. And for this reason the generations which preceded Christ had to wait for his death and burial before entering into the joys of heaven. But there seems to be no reason for them to have had to wait for the corporal ascension of Christ before taking possession "of the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world." For their

¹⁰ *S.T.*, III, 52, 5; 7, ad I; 8, ad 3.

¹¹ Saint Thomas would have Christ remain in hell until the moment of the resurrection. According to the Angelic Doctor, Christ liberated the souls in limbo not by delivering them from hell but by immediately bestowing on them the beatific vision. *Cf.* III, 52, 4, ad 1.

¹² "*Les justes demeurèrent donc encore quarante-deux jours dans les limbes, en jouissance toutefois du bonheur de la vision avec le droit acquis et inamissable à l'entrée au ciel.*" H. Quilliey, "Descente de Jesus aux Enfers," in *DTC*, vol. 4, p. 619.

separated souls to have entered heaven, it sufficed that the separated soul of Christ be the first to enter there.

This invisible glorification of Christ's soul in no wise diminishes the role of his bodily resurrection in the context of salvation-history. The resurrection will always be regarded as an event of capital importance. And Easter will still remain the summit and center of the liturgical year. The glorification of Christ will be manifested to us through the Church by her teaching on the resurrection. Until then Christ appears, here below, with his body present in the tomb and all can "behold the place where they laid him." Moreover, this is not a question of mere appearances but of reality. For during the *triduum mortis*, Christ was dead and his resurrection from the dead still remains his *visible* victory over death, not only in his sinless soul but in his blood-stained body.

It is now time to explain why I have not discussed the descent into hell in terms of I Peter 3: 18-20, which reads as follows:

For Christ suffered for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. Although put to death in the flesh he was brought to life in the spirit. In the spirit he went and made his proclamation to the spirits in prison, who refused obedience long ago while God waited patiently in the days of Noah during the building of the ark.

If one glances through the commentaries on I Peter, whether ancient or modern, it will be noted that there is one point of agreement when the learned authors come to treat of 3:19: all agree that the text is difficult; most admit that it is one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament. While various fashions of interpretation have swept the world of exegetes from time to time, from century to century, it is hard to find any other point of agreement persisting through the age-long discussion of the text.¹³ Since the exegesis of

¹³ Cf. U. Holzmeister, S.J., *Commentarius in Epistolas SS. Petri et Judae Apostolorum* (Paris: Lethielleur, 1937) pp. 79-179. M. E. Boisnard, O.P., *Quatre Hymnes Baptismales dans la Première Epître de Pierre* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1961) pp. 57-109. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Saint Peter* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1946). Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: a Study of I Peter 3:19 and Its Context* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard).

this text is not yet unanimously agreed on, I felt that it would be poor methodology to attempt to establish the doctrinal content of an article of faith on a disputed text.

In a commentary on this text, Father Galot, S.J., feels that the position I have outlined here is substantially that of the author of I Peter.¹⁴ Father Galot's position strikes me as being theologically sound but perhaps exegetically premature. It would seem as though the contrast between "flesh and spirit" in the text cannot be understood in terms of "body and soul." This would be making a Hebrew speak like a Greek. However, one of the things which has emerged from recent exegetical studies of the text is the fact that the author has been considerably influenced by apocryphal literature of his time. Apocryphal works, such as the Book of Enoch, gradually lost credit in patristic times. And literature which formed the background of the New Testament writers was regarded as suspect, was largely neglected and lost. The Book of Enoch fell into disfavor with the fourth-century Church and was lost from view until it was again discovered in an Ethiopic manuscript late in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ H. Charles lists fifty-eight passages in the New Testament which reflect its influence¹⁶ and Karl Schelkle points out that the whole account of the descent of Christ into hell in I Peter is cast ". . . in mythologischer Einkleidung."¹⁷

The theological significance of this phenomenon is the burden of a penetrating study of the belief of the primitive church made by P. Daniélou, S.J., in a book entitled *Théologie du Judeo-Christianisme*. This is a study of what has to be the first attempt to formulate a Christian theology. It is not only of Semitic origin but also was expressed in the thought categories current at that time. These were by and large supplied by the apocryphal literature of the time.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Galot, S.J., "La Descente du Christ aux Enfers," in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 83 (1961) pp. 471-491.

¹⁵ Cf. F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961) pp. 145-6.

¹⁶ Cf. R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigraphia of the Old Testament* (Oxford: 1913) vol. 2, pp. 180-1.

¹⁷ Cf. K. H. Schelkle, "Die Petrusbriefe," in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Herder: Freiburg im Breisgau, 1961) p. 107.

And in this context they discussed the descent of Christ into hell. Stripped of its mythical clothing, the doctrine of the descent of Christ into hell as believed in the primitive Church is simply that of Christ's victory over death, sin, and Satan. He proclaimed his victory over Satan by subjecting him to his power, over those who died unrepentant by confirming their sentence, and by liberating those who died believing in the coming of a Messiah.

The single mystery of Christ's passing to the Father has many aspects. Each of these stresses a part of the Lord's saving work. The divine power of the hypostatic union was present in all of them. In their historical perspective, the individual acts of salvation are integral parts of a unified whole. But when they are considered as a group, i.e., as actions used instrumentally by the divine power, then they are potential parts of the one saving act. In this context, the souls of the just were endowed with the beatific vision by means of the efficient instrumental causality of Christ's separated soul which remained hypostatically united to the person of the Word. But like ourselves, they must still await the "redemption of their bodies" of which the bodily resurrection of Christ is both the exemplar and efficient instrumental cause.

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