

Easter 6 Year A

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

This is about hell.

From the Epistle: He 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, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison

Spirits in prison. Spirits in nether regions. Spirits in Hades, Limbo, underworld. People like Adam, Eve, Abraham, Noah, from the old times that had died but had not been rescued. Now he rescued them, hauling them out. St John of Damascus wrote: 'When he had freed those who were bound from the beginning of time, Christ returned from among the dead, having opened for us the way of resurrection.'

This is what the phrase in the Apostle's creed means: he descended into hell, or descended into death. It is not in the Nicene creed, but here it is in the apostles' creed.

Not all Christians accept it, and there is scant Biblical authority for it. The strongest reason for accepting its authority is that it has always been part of the doctrine of the Orthodox (Greek, Syrian etc) churches, those churches which are most in continuity with the traditions of the early church, whose traditions were least affected by Roman politics. Those churches that spoke the language of the early Christians, and have never therefore had to cope with the problems that arise from translation from one language to another and one culture to another. They call this descent into hell the harrowing of hell.

You can choose to ignore it. You can choose to accept that it happened. You can choose to think that no matter whether it happened or not, it speaks a real truth about the human condition – as we shall see.

What is hell? Fire? Torment? Other people? Sartre

Hell is here and now, just as heaven is here and now. Heaven is a quality of life. So is hell.

Hell is the absence of God. Separation from the love of God. Hell is the absence of love. The blotting out of love, of God, by pride, arrogance, certainty of being right, exclusion of others.

Hell is when we are so troubled we despair. Despair is lack of hope.

Hell is when we are so ground down with worry, guilt, shame that we cannot perceive God.

Hell is when we are so troubled, we can't see the good in anything.

Hell is when we are so fearful, we retreat into prisons of our own making—into tombs, into memories (same word in Greek as tombs: mnema). There's a lot of fear in the world. It leads to excluding those who are different, nationalism, superiority complexes, wanting more and more power. Hell is living in fear that paralyzes us.

'Without delight we are in hell.'

Hell and the devil? I regard the devil not as one particular thing, but as the collective name for the demons that trouble me from time to time, and that I see troubling others: pride, arrogance, despair, inciting us to greed, avarice, and so on.

When we are assailed by these demons, we need the Lord to come and harrow our own personal hells. To let the Lord love the hell out of us.

Hell is not about somewhere else. It is about in here. And the harrowing of hell is not about a long time ago. It is about now and in here. Christ doesn't just drag Noah and Adam and co from hell to resurrection, but you and me. He lifts our spirits out of prison. He harrows us.

Use the Apostle's creed today.