

Sermon 1st Sunday of Lent - 21 February 2021

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Lent is a season to focus on the subjects we would perhaps prefer to avoid. Sin, death – and also what happens after... in the nineteenth century, this was an almost constant topic of conversation. Now, it is something avoided, sidestepped, locked away in a drawer. But it is important to talk about, however fearful, foreboding, or even silly, it may make us feel.

Spirits in prison, or spirits in bondage – that we hear of in today's epistle reading – is a recurring minor subject of Christian thought that has confused and caused much controversy among theologians for the past two thousand years. What does St Peter mean when he says that 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"? It is a mysterious but nonetheless evocative and powerful notion.

Some argue it refers to the so-called Harrowing of Hell, the idea that in between his death and resurrection, Jesus makes a brief visit to hell (or Hades) and releases those held captive there. In the Middle Ages, the verses were used to support the popular image of Purgatory – a temporary state of punishment after death. Others make the case that these spirits in prison are not human at all; rather that Jesus is proclaiming condemnation to imprisoned fallen angels from the time of Noah! Either way, it is an alien doctrine to many of us.

Certainly, with regards to my own upbringing, the idea of purgatory, some temporal or intermediary house of horrors that a deceased reprobate has to endure before being made fit to go to heaven – was considered deeply misleading. I was taught that you lie in your bed the way you make it. Either you die having accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, in which case (even if you were the most wicked person ever beforehand) you go straight to heaven; or, you die not having accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, in which case (even if you were the kindest person in the world) it's straight down to the other place for all eternity.

In short, once you have died there are no more chances. Death is final. But is that really the case? I'm not saying I believe in Dante's idea of purgatory, or that Jesus literally descended down to some flaming abyss, dragging flailing souls back up with him. But what is this proclamation to the dead that Peter speaks of? Not something we can ignore, I think.

Many scholars affirm that it refers not to some kind of "temporary reconnaissance mission" to Hades made by Jesus between his death and resurrection, but rather (as "alive in the spirit" – not dead!) an event following Christ's resurrection into new life. Further on in Peter's letter, he affirms in chapter 4:6 that "the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though [the dead] had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does." Scholar David

Bentley Hart says this is definitely a reference to the gospel preached to the actual dead and not (as some like to distort it) those alive in Christ's time who have since died.

The image of Christ announcing the good news even to the dead, is surely one that can offer much comfort and consolation, especially in this season of pandemic. In the midst of so many millions dying alone and not dying well, it is great solace to know that God's loving presence continues even after death. A particularly painful memory I have is that of a close Christian friend who lost her father and best friend within a few months of each other. Her dad was a Christian and her friend was not. She asked me why God chose to save her dad but not her friend. Was her wonderful, amazing, loving best friend really in hell?

The answer to this is clear enough from the words of Jesus himself: Matthew 18:14 – "It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" and John 12:32 – "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself". The Greek word translated as "draw" here, however, is *helkyso*, which does not mean "draw" but "drag". "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will drag all people to myself." Is this perhaps what Peter is referring to when he describes the risen Lord proclaiming good news to the dead?

I believe God's love is so limitless and almighty that he will not suffer anyone to be left behind or forever separate from him. Even if they reject and cut themselves from God, God will nonetheless bring them back to himself. A love that never gives up; a love that never runs out; a love that never fails.

Earlier this week, in our Ash Wednesday service Tim talked about how our salvation is not an insurance of rescue from the flames of hell but an acceptance of God's healing of our damaged, sinful and isolated natures. I don't see any reason to doubt that this process will continue after death. Many people who have lived their whole lives estranged from God (or others), and destructively centred on themselves – self-absorbed, self-seeking – a spiritual self-isolation as it were – from the love, grace, and healing power of God – and who die in such a state, will, I believe, still (as Peter describes) have the good news proclaimed to them by Christ. Death is far from the end. The story of healing, restoring, making whole, still goes on.

And those of us here in this season of Lent, in a pandemic age, must hold onto the truth that Christ has suffered for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. He has lived the whole human experience: birth, life, suffering, grief, temptation, wilderness, pain, even death – and even beyond death, and on into new life. We who place our lives in his hands, entrusting all we are to his mercy and grace: ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven – knowing that death is not the end – can be encouraged to pray for those who have gone before us, in the sure knowledge that Christ continues to proclaim his love beyond this world and beyond this life.

Amen