

## Hell

God's concealment in this world constitutes the real mystery of Holy Saturday, the mystery already transpiring in the enigmatic words telling us that Jesus "descended into hell." At the same time, the experience of our era has offered us a completely new approach to Holy Saturday, given God's concealment in the world, which belongs to him and which should proclaim his name in a thousand languages, the experience of the powerlessness of God who is yet omnipotent – this is the experience and the wretchedness of our age. But even if Holy Saturday has drawn deeply near to us in that way, even if we understand the God of Holy Saturday more than the powerful manifestation of God in thunder and lightning of which the Old Testament speaks, a question remains unresolved. . . what is really meant by the mysterious phrase that Jesus "descended into hell"?

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Let's be clear about it: no one is really capable of explaining it. Nor does it become clearer by saying that here "Hell" is a bad translation of the Hebrew word: *shêol*, indicating merely the whole kingdom of the dead and so the formula would originally have meant only that Jesus descended into the profundity of death, that he really did die and he shared in the abyss of our destiny of death.

In fact, the question here is: what is death really and what really happens when we descend into the profundity of death? We must be mindful of the fact that death is no longer the same as it was before Christ endured it, before he accepted and penetrated it, just as life, being human, is no longer the same as it was before human nature, in Christ, was able to come in contact with – and it truly did – God's own being.

Before, death was just death, separation from the land of the living and, albeit at differing degrees of profundity, something like "hell," the nocturnal side of living, impenetrable darkness. But now death is also life and when we pass over the glacial solitude of the threshold of death, we always meet once more

with him who is life, whose desire is to become the companion of our ultimate solitude and who, in the mortal solitude of his anguish on the Mount of Olives and of his cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, became a partaker of our solitudes.



***The Harrowing of Hell* by Bl. Fra Angelico, c. 1440 [Museo di San Marco, Florence]**

If a child had to venture out alone through a wood on a dark night, he would be afraid even if he were to be shown a hundred times that there was nothing to fear. He is not afraid of anything specific, to which he could put a name, but in the dark, he feels insecure, an orphan, he feels the sinister character of

inner existence. Only a human voice could console him; only the hand of a person he loves could banish the anguish, like a bad dream.

There is an anguish – the true kind nesting in the profundity of our solitudes – which cannot be overcome by reason but only by the presence of a person who loves us. This anguish, in fact, doesn't have an object to which we could put a name. It is the terrible expression of our ultimate solitude. Who among us has not felt the awful sensation of this state of abandonment? Who would not hear the blessed, comforting miracle worked in these circumstances by an affectionate word?

But wherever there is such solitude as to be inaccessible to the transforming word of love, then that is the place we call Hell. And we know that not a few men of our time, so apparently optimistic, hold the view that every encounter remains superficial, that no man has access to the ultimate and true profundity of another and that, therefore, in the ultimate depths of every existence lies desperation, even hell.

Jean-Paul Sartre expressed this poetically in one of his plays and at the same time he exposed the nucleus of his doctrine on man. One thing is sure: there will come a night when no word of comfort will penetrate the dark abandon, there will be a door which we must pass through in absolute solitude: the door of death. All this world's anguish is, in the final analysis, the anguish generated by this solitude.

This is why in the Old Testament, the word indicating the kingdom of the dead was identical to the word for hell: *shêol*. Death, in fact, is absolute solitude. But this solitude that can no longer be illumined by love, that is so profound that love can no longer reach it, is hell.

“Descended into hell” – this confession of Holy Saturday means that Christ passed through the door of solitude, that he descended into the unreachable and insuperable depth of our condition of solitude. This means, however, that also in that extreme night which no word penetrates, when we will all be like children, banished, weeping, there will be a voice that calls to us, a hand that takes our hand and leads us on.

Man's insuperable solitude was overcome from the moment *He* entered it. Hell was beaten from the moment love entered the region of death and the man's land of solitude was inhabited by him. In his profundity, man does not

live by bread. In the authenticity of his being, he lives by the fact that he is loved and is himself given the faculty to love. From the moment, there is the presence of love in death's sphere, then life penetrates death: life is not taken from your faithful, O Lord, but transformed, the Church prays in its funeral liturgy.

In the final analysis, no one can measure the portent of the words: "He descended into Hell." But if at some time it is ours to draw near to the hour of our ultimate solitude, we will be given to understand something of the great clarity of this dark mystery. In the hopeful certainty that when the hour of extreme solitude comes we will not be alone, we can already, now, presage something of what will happen. And in the throes of our protest against the darkness of the death of God, we begin to be grateful for the light that comes to us from this same darkness.