

# THE DESCENT INTO HELL

By HENRI DE LAVALETTE

**M**ORE THAN FIFTY YEARS AGO, George Tyrrell, the modernist, expressed his astonishment that the descent of Christ into hell should still be mentioned in the creed, and be included in the essential points of faith which all christians must profess, and which the Church has handed on from generation to generation. Tyrrell was opening up a problem which faces the Church today. Unlike the christians of the middle ages, we know very well that the *symbolum*, the apostles' creed, does not go back in a direct line to the apostles themselves. Legend would have it that each of the apostles wrote one of the twelve articles of the creed before they separated to go on their world-wide mission. This legend means nothing more to us now than a rather naive expression of our fore-fathers' awareness that they were in continuity with the faith of the apostles. We know that the reality is much more profound than the fiction: the apostles' creed received its form slowly, its articles gradually developing around the public profession of faith demanded of catechumens and professed by baptized christians. It is in baptism that christians recognize the primacy of God's action progressively at work in history through the sending of Jesus and of the holy Spirit, acting in the Church to bring about that fulness of salvation which is eternal life and the resurrection of the body.

The articles of the creed have been given a more precise formulation or have been expanded to counteract particular heresies, which are, at bottom, interpretations diverging radically from that christian faith professed by the Church. Hence, in the *symbolum* of the liturgy, the nicene creed, we find the statement that God is the 'creator of things seen and unseen', in order to rule out the interpretation that evil owes its origin to the angelic adversaries of God not created by God the Father. Such pastoral motives provide us with a means of discerning the successive steps in the gradual shaping of the creeds.

Turning now to the article concerning Christ's descent into hell, we find, first of all, that not all the creeds make mention of it – the nicene creed, for example. Further, it is difficult to understand

exactly why it was included in certain of the creeds. There are, in fact, very varied explanations of it given by the Fathers in their sermons and other writings to catechumens. Hence the further problem of deciding the precise origin of this article.

All these difficulties led Tyrrell to draw two conclusions. First, this article of the creed is an embarrassment, retained only out of respect for a venerable tradition, but without any real influence on our living. Instead of clinging to this conservative attitude, understandable enough as long as the legend was believed, would we not be more faithful to the authentic tradition of the Church, now restored to us by the scholarship of scientific historians, by reducing the apostles' creed to those essential points which affect our faith in this day and age? Secondly, the mention of the descent into hell would seem to be a positive hindrance in the expression of our faith. Long before Bultmann, Tyrrell sensed the danger of enclosing God in the dimension of space, not only because spatial representations are outmoded, but also – and this is a much more profound reason – because God cannot be 'situated' in space like a thing of this world. Thus the descent into hell would appear to be a harmful as well as a useless doctrine.

In the space of fifty years no-one has been able to add anything really new to such a radical criticism, though exegetes have been exercised about the scriptural support for this article. The only explicit mention of it is in the First Epistle of Peter,<sup>1</sup> and this is the traditional scriptural argument. But the history of exegesis shows that the passage is particularly obscure.<sup>2</sup> Can we be sure that the author intended to state a proposition which we must hold as essential to our faith; or was he not simply making incidental use of an imaginative framework belonging to his time, without giving it the value of a revelation of a reality to which he would be the only witness?

What answers have been given to the serious objections Tyrrell raises? As far as reformulating the creed is concerned, three observations have been made – two theoretical, one practical.

First, there is the ecumenical value of the creeds. They were composed before any schism took place between east and west, with the exception of the latin addition of the *Filioque* to the nicene creed. Since they represent a bond between all christians, is there not a moral obligation on all to preserve this bond intact, and not to

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 3, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Dalton, W. J., S.J., *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (Rome, 1965).

break it unilaterally, even for pastoral reasons? It may be true that the bond is often equivocal: the various christian churches do not have the same reality in mind when they confess their faith in the catholicity of the Church. And with regard to the descent into hell, it can be said that the western tradition very soon linked it with the death of Christ, as a mere corollary; whilst the iconography of the east shows us that the descent into hell can also be the symbol of the resurrection.

Secondly, it would appear that Tyrrell greatly oversimplified the problem when he spoke of translating the old creeds into meaningful modern terms. We have become very conscious of how complex are the Church's responsibilities in this field, through our own concrete experience of the difficulties of translating the roman liturgy into the vernacular. The task of adaptation to our own culture has to be reconciled with the need for entering into the culture of the bible. In trying to avoid the danger of 'rejudaizing', of shackling ourselves to a biblical anthropology and cosmology neither of which in themselves are revealed truths, we must not run the risk of underestimating the richness of the Word of God, always more precious than our limited cultural perceptions, the inexhaustible store of all the successive developments of traditional doctrine. Just as the homily is a mediation between the liturgy of the word and the modern assembly, so too, catechesis must prepare the believers to respond to their hearing of the Word by professing the faith of the Church, letting themselves be absorbed into the totality of the faith of the Church. Certainly the words of the Church's creed are not unalterable in the same way as the words of scripture. But surely it is fitting that the response of the Church should be given in a language as close as possible to that of scripture and homogeneous with it? We are not dealing here with a problem in aesthetics – though this consideration ought not to be underrated; we are dealing with one of the dimensions of our faith.

Finally, Tyrrell took care not to formulate a creed adapted to our times. It is far too difficult a task. Again, the liturgy provides us with a significant comparison – the bidding prayers. Now that we are allowed to use our own initiative in composing them, we can see for ourselves how flat and stale our formulae are, how difficult it is to get the essential point across, and how diverse are the aspirations of that complex reality which we vaguely term the modern world. In contrast, the traditional creed admirably avoids abstract ideas and follows in its rhythm the sequence of events of salvation history.

But even when we have got rid of the itch to reconstruct the creed, we are still left with the questions Tyrrell raised about the descent into hell: is it really a useless and a harmful statement? We can restate the difficulty in terms of our own experience. Do we feel a need to give this article an important place in our catechisms? Do we not pass over it in a discreet silence? Or, even when we do speak of it, is this not simply to put people on their guard against a 'spatial imagination', or to propose it as a sort of corollary to our faith in the reality of Christ's death? It must be said that we have difficulty in discerning what original contribution this article can make to our contemporary catechisms. We quickly pass from Christ's death to his resurrection without feeling the need to fill in, even imaginatively, the time between good Friday and the paschal vigil. The liturgy itself shows this. Holy Saturday is an empty time, devoid of any liturgical ceremony. It is an awkward time, when one does not know whether to weep for the death of Christ or laugh for his resurrection. Ecclesiastes may well say: 'There is a time to weep and a time to laugh', but how are we to use this in-between time which is holy Saturday? Is it to be filled with an overwhelming sadness that has exhausted its tears and is numb and helpless; or with a gathering up of all our energies for the sudden explosion of joy? It would seem that this in-between time runs the risk of becoming a time emptied of all feeling. At all events, we may well ask how many christians meditate on the descent into hell during holy Saturday. And yet this is the very liturgical time when we ought to meditate on this article. For by situating this article in its liturgical context we can see the utility of this doctrine. Paradoxically enough, the descent of Christ into hell 'fills in' the void between good Friday and the paschal vigil; but, by filling this emptiness spiritually, it deepens it. It prevents us from seeing this in-between time as nothing more than a psychological and pedagogical in-between time, and helps us to take it up in faith, and that is quite a different matter.

But let us first of all get rid of a misunderstanding. It is said that the descent into hell is an expression which is a positive hindrance to our faith. It corresponds to a 'mythical' way of expression, to the spatial representation of the realities of faith which creates false difficulties. If proof of this objection is required, it is enough to recall that every explanation of this article of the creed has to begin by clearing away the erroneous views which spring unbidden to the mind. First, the hell to which Christ descends has nothing in com-

mon with the hell of the damned. Secondly, this hell must not be localized anywhere in our cosmic space. Positively, we are told that this hell is the equivalent of the hebraic *sheol*, the 'place' where, according to the oldest jewish tradition, the dead go. But this place is not to be understood as a point in visible space. It is a question of 'spiritual space', distinct from the heaven where God dwells, and from earth where man lives. *Sheol* is the dwelling of the dead.

It is true that if we stop there, we are very little the wiser. After all, what is this spiritual space, what does this 'dwelling of the dead' mean? If 'he descended into hell' means no more than that Christ truly died, it would be simpler to say so. It is, however, possible to get behind the spatial images of the jewish *sheol*, the greek *hades* and the latin *infernium* to a single basic experience common to all human reflections on death. Let us begin by examining the localized descriptions of the dwelling places of the dead. At first sight they all seem very different: the place may be the desert, the sea, the underside of the grave, the depths of the earth, a city under the earth with galleries leading to the various graves. But they all have one thing in common: they are all places which are outside common experience, places where man feels lost, abandoned, out of place. There are so many ways of saying the same simple but fundamental thing: death is a departure into what is unknown for the living. Death brings us face to face with the unknown. All that is left to our sense-experience is the corpse. And yet the corpse is not the dead man; it is that which remains in our world of what man has been, a reminder of a presence that once was, a witness of present absence. The corpse no longer assumes the functions of the living body. It is no longer the means of communication amongst men themselves. The dead man is absent from that which signifies his presence to us. To honour the corpse merely means to honour the memory of a dead man, to honour his past. In his own present, the dead man escapes our perceptions, evades our grasp. For us, he has become unknown in the state which is his present one. *Sheol* is the reverse side of the basic fact. Death is not to be reduced merely to what it is from our point of view as living men. *Sheol* means the life of the dead, from the point of view of the dead. But we have no experience of this, here on earth.

If we can get behind the spatial representations of *sheol* – literally the re-presentations of what cannot be re-presented – and understand what is living man's existential attitude in face of death, we must recognize that this affirmation of *sheol's* existence, of a myste-

rious survival after death which is outside our ordinary experience, is primary and cannot be by-passed or replaced by any succeeding affirmation. There is only one intellectual position which is really opposed to the affirmation of *sheol*, and that is to deny any sort of survival after death – there is no other existence except that which we see here on earth. All that faith affirms about the conditions of the existence of the dead – judgment, resurrection, etc. – does not destroy the existence of *sheol*, precisely because they are the affirmations of faith, not of sense-experience. The dead remains in the beyond of living man's sense-experience.

Further, the affirmation of death as the descent into *sheol* is an affirmation of the awareness a man has of death as a departure into the abyss, as a cutting off from the land of the living: not of non-existence, but of an existence which is outside human experience. Any certainty a man can have about the state of the dead cannot be verified experimentally: it belongs on another level – the level of faith. This is why the affirmation of *sheol* as an unknown quantity in sense-experience is perfectly compatible with the affirmations of the faith, which belong to another order of knowing.

All this helps us to understand the primary meaning of the statement: 'Christ descended into *sheol*'. Because he truly lived his life in our world, approaching death meant for him, as for us, a plunge into the unknown of sense-experience. For him, as for us, the thought of this abyss evoked a torment of anguish. The gospel narratives of Gethsemane are a sufficient witness of this fact. And it was an anguish overcome by a certainty which came from elsewhere: the total surrender of himself into the hands of his Father, the act of filial abandonment to the loving will of God.

The descent of Christ into *sheol* is, then, an affirmation of the reality of Christ's own human experience of death. And its elementary application to our own attitudes follows spontaneously. 'The servant is not above his master'. We too must confront the human situation of death. For us, too, death means a plunge into the abyss. In our following of Christ, we can overcome this agony only by an act of filial abandonment. The death of Christ and our faith in him does not dispense us from the human conditions attaching to every death. It does enable us to take death upon ourselves, which is a very different thing. The contemplation of Christ's death constrains us to a choice of faith, hope and charity.

This first and fundamental lesson concerning Christ's descent into hell is never completely learnt. It is to be relearnt over and over

again, until the day of our death. Nor is it the only lesson.

The descent of Christ into hell becomes, in fact, a passing through. It takes place in the time between his death and his resurrection. Until Christ came, *sheol* was a vague, indeterminate place, signifying the state of the dead. And the dead man remained dead. Christ, who died under Pontius Pilate, certainly descended into hell. But he rose again on the third day from among the dead. Once again we are at the centre of the faith. Accustomed as we are to consider Christ as God, we have had to insist once again on the reality of his humanity, and meditate on the human manner of his death. This is absolutely indispensable if we are to renew our faith in his divinity. This man truly descended into hell; but equally truly he came out again – a thing entirely unheard of in human nature. Notice that it is not a question here of being rescued from death, of a coming out on parole, of a reprieve granted after the event, as in the resurrection of Lazarus. It is a question of a new and definitive state: and, we must admit, one that is also very difficult to describe when we examine it. Christ reassumed his body, ‘appeared’ to his disciples without being mistaken for a ghost; one could go on appealing as St Paul did,<sup>1</sup> for years, to first-hand witnesses – those who had seen and heard the risen Christ. And yet this Christ, who is beyond this ‘beyond’ which is the unknown of death for us, returns precisely from ‘we know not where’. And if once more he makes himself homogeneous to our sense-experience, this is by his own will and not because he is confined within our system of space and time. His normal ‘place’ is no longer our earth and our heaven. He, the pledge of a new earth and a new heaven, dwells as the First-Born among the dead, in the divine glory. His appearances are only transitory. To affirm that he is real, even though he is revealed to their senses, demands from his apostles, first and foremost, faith.

The manner of his presence, now, for us who have not passed through death, the manner of his presence to the Church until he comes again at the parousia, is a manner of presence *to* our faith (this is not to say, of course, a presence *created by* our faith); this is the eucharistic presence, the nourishment of our life as members on earth of his body, baptized into his death and resurrection, to be conformed, according to promise, to his death and resurrection.

Believing in his resurrection, on the witness of the apostolic

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15.

Church, we confess that *sheol* no longer exists as a definitive state. The resurrection, not *sheol*, is the last word, for Christ first of all, and then for us with him. It is our hope, in faith, without having sensible certitude of it, that for us, too, *sheol* is no more than a passage to union with the glorified Christ and the happiness of resurrection. Death is no longer a prison of the condemned. Such is the meaning of the ancient iconography, which loved to depict Christ in his descent into hell, the new man who leads the first Adam out of prison, and recapitulates in himself all humanity.

Our age is peculiarly sensitive on the question of eschatological descriptions. We are more aware than we used to be of the limits of our experience; we can no longer take the sadistic descriptions of the punishment of hell, or the rather pale and childish representations of the joys of heaven. We stop our informant by telling him that no-one can speak as though he had been there . . .

Nor can we any longer accept in a literal sense the images, often drawn from such different sources, of the sacred authors. We know the facts: it is not a question of straight reporting but of imaginative descriptions suited to the literary genres of the particular age. But those who listened to the gospel were not taken in, either. There is no religious contradiction in the fact that Jesus could speak of Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning and, in the parable, of the hell of Dives as an abyss.

We know – and Augustine never tired of repeating it to us – that the object of revelation is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to bring us to a change of heart. God has revealed to us only what is useful for our salvation. How could one give a theological answer to questions which have no bearing on man's relationship with God?

We are only too aware of the weaknesses of the answers hazarded by the theologians. When we read the descriptions of the young St Thomas of the glorified universe, we are amused to find that the combination of scriptural texts and aristotelian cosmology can promise us nothing more than an inanimate, mineral universe. We are much less amused, saddened even, by the psychological and religious havoc caused by the imprudent propagation amongst the uneducated of the 'visions' of mystics and pseudo-mystics. St Augustine has already put us on our guard here.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, we feel a spontaneous sympathy with the tone of the decree of the Council of Trent on purgatory. It simply states

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<sup>1</sup> *De genesi ad litteram* 1, XII.



what the catholic faith has always held, that there is a purgatory, and gives the traditional reason, which is the traditional practice of the Church to pray for the faithful who are in purgatory, especially through the mass. We have a duty to repudiate not only the ideas which provoke superstition, but also those which merely awake curiosity, for these also are scandalous and harmful to the faithful.<sup>1</sup>

What is true of purgatory can be extended to all that concerns the life of man or the soul in the beyond. And the sobriety of the constitution on the Church is readily understandable. The expressions used there are as close as possible to the text of the bible.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of the descent of Christ into *sheol* is remarkable for this: not only must it be interpreted according to the same rule of sober and reverent discretion; it is in itself a direct reminder of this truth. For *sheol*, properly speaking, is that which we do not know, that 'beyond' of life into which we cannot penetrate, nor invade nor colonize as we would wish. It defies all imagination. So, for that matter, does heaven; the truth remains that 'no-one can see God and not die'.

The descent of Christ into *sheol* teaches us just as much about *sheol* as we need to know: nothing can separate us from Christ. 'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living'.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of death which hangs over us and draws nearer to us every day, what is asked of us is that we should not turn in upon ourselves and our anguish, nor hang on every false prophecy which claims to lift the veil across the unknown and to reassure us with fictitious certainties. What is asked of us is that we should draw ever closer to Christ. In this perspective, death is no longer an absence; it opens the possibility to a deeper union. We do not expect of Christ that he will alleviate directly our natural anguish in the moment of death. We do not expect that he will reveal to us 'secrets' that will reassure us. We expect his presence and his love.

It now remains to draw one other conclusion from Christ's passage through *sheol*. Christ is no longer in *sheol*. He is risen and at the Father's right hand. For our christian faith it is not possible for death to keep his face entirely hidden. We have the option of being united with Christ in his glory or of being separated from him for

<sup>1</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzger 1820.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, ch 7.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 14, 8-9.

ever. We must guard against the illusion that, because to sense – experience death is a being plunged into the unknown, we can wait until we are in the mysterious beyond before we make our choice for or against Christ. Since Christ died, descended into *sheol* and is risen, we can no longer take refuge in the simple obscurity surrounding what cannot be experienced before it happens. We have to give a meaning to our death not as a pure and simple entry into the unknown, but to death as a way to union with Christ, as the act by which we arrive at the end of the road along which Christ leads his own and brings them together. To treat death simply as the unknown from every point of view would be tantamount to denying the reality of Christ's resurrection. It would be to cut ourselves off from the call that Christ makes to us; and this would no longer be *sheol*, but hell properly so called. To overcome the agony which rises unbidden when confronted with the unknown, to live even now face to face with death in faith and the power of the Spirit who will fashion us after the image of the First-Born: this is the act of hope. We do not expect to have this openness to the Spirit of ourselves, but of the power of God who calls us by his Son in the Spirit. Since Christ made his journey to *sheol* we know that death is not neutral.

Death is not neutral for us; but what of so many of our contemporaries who do not have the faith? The acceptance of a *sheol*, of human experience beyond death, even if we can say nothing about it, seems rare enough. For so many of our fellow-men, the only survival they look forward to is in the memory of their children and their friends – the survival of affection which will pass with memory, the survival of a part played, a mere ripple in the tide of history. Otherwise, and this is more frequent perhaps, the only reaction we encounter is a kind of agnostic fatalism which refuses to take up any settled attitude as being too difficult: 'Is a man snuffed out entirely, or is there some mysterious survival? How can we know? All we can do is to try to solve our daily problems, which is hard enough'.

And they accuse christians of being resigned to their lot! This sort of resignation, in the face of the ultimate meaning of existence, is one that makes the heart bleed. How empty our christian witness seems, how unavailing our mission of bringing the good news of the resurrection! We need to return to the gospel, and after contemplating the terror of Christ in face of death and its agony, to listen to his words on the cross, as he pleads on our behalf: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'. We unite the

feebleness of our faith in the resurrection and of our witness before the unbelieving resignation of our contemporaries and turn, as their brothers, to the insurpassable love of the Father. This state of not knowing is no longer only one of the signs of the world's sin, the sin which broke the heart of Christ. It becomes, paradoxically, the source of forgiveness and blessing, the reason for merciful love.

Whether he hides or reveals himself, God is love. This is also the sense of psalmist's prayer taken up by Christ on the cross, where the cry of abandonment and of confidence in the love of God, for all time and for all of us, are indissolubly linked: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

The certainty of the christian faith does not cut us off from our uncertain brethren. Mysteriously, because it is in Christ, it works with him for their redemption. It is for our salvation, the salvation of all mankind, that Christ descended into hell.