

Father O'Connor's Homily for 5 May 2024  
Sixth Sunday of Easter-B

Acts of the Apostles 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48  
1 John 4: 7-10  
John 15: 9-17

The Creed, our Profession of Faith, begins with these words: “I believe in one God.”

There are two forms of the Creed that we pray regularly. One is the Apostles' Creed that we use for our Baptismal promises, and that we use to begin the rosary with the prayer at the crucifix.

The other form of the Creed is a longer version given to us by the Council of Nicaea [325 A.D.] and is called the Nicene Creed. That is the one that we pray every Sunday at Mass, right after the homily.

In the Apostles' Creed, there are these lines midway through: “He was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again from the dead.” That line, Jesus “descended into hell” – do you know what it means?

First off, “He descended into hell” is a poor English translation. In Latin it reads “ad inferos” [ad IN-fair-os], which does not mean the hell of damnation as in “ad inferno” [ad in-FAIR-no]. It refers instead to that mysterious state of being where the souls of the faithful departed awaited the redemption of the world. Sometimes it is called “the realm of the dead” or “the edge.” Or in Greek mythology it was referred to as “Hades” or “the underworld.”

When Adam and Eve sinned, the gates of heaven were closed until our Redeemer would come. So all of the people who died loving God – from Adam and Eve all the way forward to the time of the crucifixion – could not yet get into heaven. But when Jesus died on the cross our sins were forgiven, the gates of heaven were opened, and then Jesus “descended into hell” to lead the just ones into heaven.

The piety of the Middle Ages loved to speculate on this mysterious state of being. Many fascinating paintings of the time show Jesus holding His triumphant banner, throwing open the gates of the lower regions, and welcoming Adam and Eve to heaven.

A touching modern meditation has Saint Joseph speaking first and saying to Jesus, “Son, how is your Mother?”

“He descended into hell” to take all those faithful people to heaven right after He died on the cross on Good Friday, and before He rose from the dead on Easter Sunday morning.

**But what does that teaching, “He descended into hell,” mean for us? I would like to present two lessons. And here is the first: there is no wall, there is no door that we human beings can make that the Lord is unable to pass through.**

A fellow named Paul was my barber, and in seeing Paul every couple of weeks, we became friends over the years. Paul was a good Catholic man. He was an adult altar server at St. John’s Cathedral. I got to know Paul’s wife and their son too.

And then nineteen years ago [February 2005] his son called to tell me the sad news that Paul, his father, had taken his own life.

Paul’s sudden death came as a great surprise to me and to many other people who knew him and loved him. Apparently Paul had built a wall within himself and on his side there was a personal hell going on which he felt he could cope with no longer. But even at those last moments of Paul’s despair, I believe that Jesus, the Divine Mercy, was there with Paul and offering Paul the grace of a final repentance.

There is a famous painting by William Holman Hunt [1827-1910] called “Light of the World.” It is an illustration of a quote from the Book of Revelation: “Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears Me calling and opens the door, I will enter the house and have supper with him, and he with Me” [Rev. 3: 20].

The painting depicts Jesus holding a lamp and knocking at the door, asking for permission to enter. The closed door represents the human soul. In the painting William Holman Hunt put the door handle only on the inside. It conveys the message that Jesus is standing there knocking, but we have to decide whether or not to open the door and let Him in.

Is that accurate theology? Not entirely. Not in the light of today’s readings. St. John told us in the second reading today: “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that God loved us, and sent His Son as expiation [as our Redeemer] for our sins.” In other words, God has loved us first.

That is what Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain.”

And so the first lesson is this: **“He descended into hell.” There is no wall, there is no door that we human beings can make that the Lord is unable to pass through.**

**And the second lesson is this: if we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we must descend into the hells of other people to help them along too.**

I use for my example Pope John XXIII, now called Saint John XXIII. When he was first elected pope, he visited a prison in the city of Rome and he told the prisoners, “You couldn’t come to see me, so I came to see you!”

John XXIII told them, “There are three ways for men to lose money in Italy: farming, gambling and womanizing.” He said, “My dad chose the least interesting of those three ways – he was a farmer.” He went on to say that one of his brothers got caught poaching, and one of his uncles had done some time in prison. He reassured the men, “We are all children of God. And I – I am your brother.”

One of the men, a convicted murderer, came up to Pope John and asked, “Is there hope of forgiveness for me?” Pope John answered that question not with words but with a deed. He embraced that prisoner – he gave him a warm hug. And the news cameras of the world caught sight of the tears coming down many faces in that room.

John XXIII descended into their hells to show the prisoners that there is a special place for each one of us in the Lord’s heart, no matter what we have done or what have failed to do.

The Easter season is nearly over, and Pentecost is almost at our doorsteps, two weeks from now. As redeemed Christians, we know that whatever private hell we may be going through, it will not keep Jesus from coming into our lives. And it also offers us the grace and the courage to follow Jesus’ example and visit other people’s private hells and offer them our love, our compassion, our readiness to just listen – and, perhaps, even a warm hug.

They are mysterious words: “He descended into hell.” What blessed assurance they are for us as we make our journeys through life. And what an example to follow as an Easter people who have been redeemed by Jesus’ dying on the cross and rising from the dead for us.

As Saint John Paul II put it, quoting Saint Augustine: “We are an Easter people, and ‘Alleluia’ is our song.”

Christ is risen! Truly He is risen!