

The Great Vigil of Easter

Bulletin

Audio

'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison.'

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Like an unfaithful servant, they had thought they had killed our Lord, and so would await to *receive His inheritance from the master*; or having buried him in the ground, would be praised by *the harsh man*. Yet now the Lord is not simply buried, but *as a servant enters into the joy of His Father*; having suffered all the envy of Satan, *he goes to burn down the cities of His enemies, and will grievously destroy those wretches*.

Though indeed His body was committed to the tomb, yet He descends into hell, to *spoil the spoiler, to cast down the mighty from their thrones and break the proud one in the imagination of his heart; to bring good news to the poor, and to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*.

The Lord descends *to preach to the spirits in prison, the year of the Lord's favor*.

It is a strange and harrowing thing to behold, and impossible to imagine, the scene of Christ entering into Hell, to destroy the citadels and dungeons and shackles of the devil, to raise His royal banner upon the capitoline hill of the infernal lands; to see *even the demons now believe the victory of our Lord, and tremble, for their hour has finally come*.

It is impossible to imagine, for the Scriptures tell us vanishingly little about Jesus' descent into Hell, besides that it happened. It does not mention the mighty hero Christ like a king of old or a champion clad in bronze storming and slaying the

ranks of defiled angels, with thunder reigning out and the earth breaking beneath their feet; with 'one little devil falling through a window in fear, and another tripping into a hole with astonishment.'

It makes no such mention of such things. All we are told is that Christ descended, and that having done so, *He preached to the spirits in prison*.

But what did He say, and what kind of sermon did He proclaim?

Those who teach the writing of sermons will say that the best sermons always speak directly to the preacher's own people.

For our Lord entered through the gates of Sheol, and as a faithful son first came to His father according to the flesh. Though King David, like a prodigal, fled the heart of God to spend his being on adultery and murder, only to return begging for mercy from the Prophet Nathan; yet now Christ comes to him as his Son, who was put to death by the Lord for the sake of his sin.

Kneeling down before the aged king, the Son of David spoke to him. 'I was as a lamb, dear father, a lamb who forever dwelt in the house of God, who ate of His table and drank of His cup; beneath His covering I dreamed His dreams, and under His roof I was to Him a Son. Yet you, my earthly father, were overcome by your flesh, and stole me from the House of my heavenly Father, and slaughtered me, that I might become a feast for many. Now indeed I have been slaughtered, and even now I give my flesh to eat and blood to drink, that I might have many brothers, according to my flesh, and that you may have many heirs according to yours. Your sin, dear father, which Nathan declared *put away* from you, was placed upon me, and this sin I now carry down into this abyss, that it might die here forever, in this fire and darkness. Let us go, dear father according to my flesh, let us go to my Father and your Father; to my God and your God, for the House of David is now established forever, and *of its peace there shall be no end*.

But what did He say, and what kind of sermon did He preach?

He appeared before Holy Moses, and before his people, and *sitting down upon the mount, He opened His mouth, and said*: 'By your hand, O Moses, you did the wonders of My Father. By the staff in your hand, you called down upon the gods hail and sorrow and affliction; their rivers you turned to blood, and their skin you made a pestilence. Now I have come that the dreadful works of My Father might

destroy this prison house which holds you and all your people captive. To free you from this hell, O Moses, I have come, for I am the arm of Your God, stretched out against the Prince of this world. By the blood of my side, I will choke the devil, and by the scourging of My flesh I will plague the accuser, until all the demons know that *I am the Lord*. From this house of death I will deliver you, though not into a wilderness, as you once had, but into a *land flowing with milk and honey*, the *New Jerusalem*, and to a Tabernacle *not made with hands*. You gave to your people the Law, to be *bound upon their hands and upon their foreheads*; but the Law I give *I shall carve into their hearts. For I will be their God, and they will be my people*. You were kept from entering the earthly promised land, but now I, your Joshua, will guide you into the eternal promised land. Let us go, my servant, for, *for freedom's sake I have set you free.*'

But what did He say, and what kind of sermon did He preach?

From a great way off did the Christ see His servant Job, ancient, alone, blinded, and covered in ash. Drawing near to him, He struck him on the cheek, and spat upon his face, and spoke to him. 'So too was I struck by those who believed themselves holy, and was spat upon by those who were proud. Every kind of torture I endured, and everything from me was taken. Even as the devil took from you your children, your house, your wife, your wealth, your health, your body and life, so too at *the proper time*, the devil handed me over to the scribes and Pharisees, to the soldiers and to the people, that by their hand I might be smitten, and by their laughter I might be mocked. My disciples sought to deliver me from my Passion, even as your friends sought to comfort you in yours. But it was necessary that I drink of this cup, even as it was necessary that you suffer yours, even to the dregs, for I *endured the shame of the cross, that I might rise again to newness of life, even to the face of the Father*, even as you prayed to see your God *with your own eyes, even in the flesh*. I am your God, and with your eyes you now see *your Redeemer. Behold I have conquered hell and overthrown death*, and now *live forevermore*. Let us go, dear friend, for now hell and all the world is *my footstool*.

But what did he say, and what kind of sermon did He preach?

The Lord earnestly has sought our first father Adam; in the depths of the abyss the Christ searched; and finding him, as a lost sheep, He called out, and seeing him as one who sleeps, He commanded:

'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.

'I am your God, who for your sake became your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: Come forth, and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

'I command you: Awake, O sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person.

'For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form; that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

'Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image.

'See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

'I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My wound has healed the wound in your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my side has sheathed the sword which was turned against you.

'But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life. I posted the cherubim to guard you as they would slaves; now I make the cherubim worship you as they would God.

"The cherubim throne has been prepared, the bearers are ready and waiting, the bridal chamber is in order, the food is provided, the everlasting houses and rooms

are in readiness; the treasures of good things have been opened; the kingdom of heaven has been prepared before the ages.'

'Let us leave this place.'

'For you were dead, and are alive again; you were lost, but now are found.'

'And on the third day, He rose again from the dead.'

'Christ is Risen!'

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