

Ask Fr. James

In the Creed, we profess that Christ Descended into Hell. What does it mean?

After the death of Christ on the Cross, he was brought down from the Cross and buried. This is what is meant by "He descended into Hell." For all day Holy Saturday, the Lord of Light and Life descends into the place of shadows, into the pit of death. The Apostles Creed means by this doctrine that there, he overcomes darkness with his uncreated light; overcomes corruptible death with his immortal life. This is in fulfillment of what he said earlier before his death that:

Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live... for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:25-28).

Again the Holy Bible says:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life (Matthew 27:51-52).

The descent of Jesus into hell was not a descent to suffering. Pope Benedict in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, states that Christ's descent into hell is not 'merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante's Inferno. Rather he goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss' (p. 20). The Holy Saturday descent into hell is an anticipation of the climactic Easter event. It is the synopsis acclaiming Christ's victory over death and hell.

By his descent, he rescues us from the condition of mortality and brings light to this abyss and when he "raised up the dead from the dwelling place beneath the earth, all the powers of heaven cried aloud; 'Giver of Life, O Christ, glory to Thee - The Easter Alleluia. On this day the God-man, who is without sin and who reconciled humankind with God on the cross, not only defeats death but rescues all those who of good will who died before him from the pit of sin and corruption and takes them with him to the kingdom of light and life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) explains this doctrine in this way: 'Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him' (CCC # 633). His descent was to preach the gospel to those who had died before the incarnation. In Ephesians 4:9, Paul says that before Jesus ascended he 'also descended first into the lower parts of the earth and Peter says Christ preaches to the dead in the underworld, to those who were righteous and, possibly, to those who were not (1 Peter 3:18 – 4:6).

People have always wondered if by his descent into hell he opened the way to paradise for everyone without exception. It is the doctrine of the Church that Jesus Christ atoned for the sins not just of Christians but of the whole world (1 John 2:2). This is the reason why at Mass, during the Eucharistic prayers, we remember those here present, and all those who have died in the peace of Christ, and all the dead whose faith is known to God alone. Our prayers at Mass cover those who died before they had the opportunity to profess their faith with the Christian community, giving hope that they will arrive at saving faith through the grace which the Holy Spirit offered to them in a manner known only to God.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he would answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.