

HE DESCENDED INTO HELL....

During these days of Eastertime when the *Nicene Creed* is ideally replaced by the *Apostles' Creed*, at Sunday Mass, we hear that one curious line that is omitted from the Profession of Faith we use on most solemnities of the year: *he descended into hell*. That "journey" of Jesus occurs between his burial and his resurrection and can cause a bit of confusion if we think of hell in New Testament terms either as a place of punishment or of absence. So where exactly did Jesus go and perhaps more importantly, why?

The *hell* referred to in the *Apostles' Creed* is really synonymous with the *Sheol* of the Old Testament where the "shades" of the dead were sent. For ancient Israel, belief in eternal life was by no means clear-cut, as the gospel disagreements between Pharisees and Sadducees attest. The dominant belief was that eternal life resided in offspring and that, after death, only the *shade* of a person remained in what popular Christian piety would have referred to as *limbo* (which, by the way, does not and never did exist). The "soul" which was the divine "breath of life", returned to God. And *Sheol*, or the "abode of the dead", was a place of neither punishment nor reward but simply an eternal non-existence—which seems a contradiction in terms, but is as close as one can get to explaining it. Believe me, I know, because I wrote an "A" grade, twenty-page term paper on this topic for one of my seminary bible classes forty-five years ago!

But back to Jesus' visit to *hell*..... Because the "gates of heaven" envisioned in Christian theology were "closed" after the sin of our "first parents" and because Christian theology recognizes that life continues after death in either heaven for the just or "hell" for the truly evil, the question had to be answered: where did the "souls of the just" reside from the beginning of creation to the time of our redemption? The patriarchs and all the other righteous people of the Old Testament deserved a reward but that reward was impossible without the saving sacrifice of the Son of God. So the souls (not the *shades*) of the righteous waited—in *Sheol*: no punishment, no pain, just lots of waiting until Jesus *descended* before he *rose again*. He brought them from what one might call "heaven's waiting room" to receive their long-awaited reward in the Kingdom.

And perhaps all this is the origin of *limbo* as a place of peace minus the beatific vision. But after the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, there was no need for such a "place" of finality short of heaven. Rather, we see *purgatory* as the "place" some of us may need before we can fully appreciate or accept the gift of seeing God "face to face." But then we have to understand the true meaning of *purgatory* which has its root in *purgation* or *cleansing*—not so much cleansing from sin and certainly not punishment, but rather a purging, a letting go, of our attachments to this world which can keep us from giving ourselves totally to God for all eternity in the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus "opened the gates" once and for all. We just have to accept the invitation and walk on in.

Fr. Bob

