

# The Descent of Christ into Hell <sup>166</sup>

by Rob van der Hart, O.P.

In the Apostles' Creed the Christian professes to believe 'in Jesus Christ who was crucified, dead and buried, descended to hell, on the third day rose from the dead...'; the Catholics are told by the Fourth Lateran Council that Jesus Christ 'descended into hell, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven'; the Anglicans are taught (Thirty-Nine Articles, art. 3) that 'it is to be believed that Christ went down into hell'; and the Lutherans accept (art. 9 of the *Formulae Concordiae*) that 'the entire Christ, God and man, after his burial descended to hell, overcame the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and deprived the devil of his prestige'.

For once there is a doctrinal unity among the Christian confessions. But what is the Descent to me, a Christian of the twentieth century?

Shall I drag you before the Inquisition, threatening eternal damnation if you refuse to submit to the collective teaching of the Christian Churches?

But why should anyone want to force us into believing that Christ did indeed descend into hell when neither hell nor descent seem to have a real place in our lives?

Besides, it will not prove difficult to get acquitted of such charges of unbelief. It is easy to relegate abstract and fanciful religious information to the colourful mythological flourishing which Christianity appears to have picked up on its journey through religious traditions from all over the world. Is there not also that grave warning from St Paul against man's tendency to leave his proper abode, concerning himself proudly with the affairs of the divine, or bending too eagerly over the hideous and dark places at the unapproachable centre of existence?

But the righteousness that comes by faith says, 'Do not say to yourself, "Who can go up to heaven?"' (that is to bring Christ down), 'or, "Who can go down to the abyss?"' (to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you: It is upon your lips and in your heart' (Rom. 10, 6-8).

Is it not a fact that the idea of the descent was suspiciously in favour with the heretics? And does it therefore not become even more likely that the origin of the notion is found in the mythological traditions of 'other religions'?

A further argument against the descent as part of the *Depositum Fidei* can be found in the fact that the relevant phrase in the Apostles' Creed is merely a later addition to a more original and basic summary of the faith, which is known as the Roman Creed. Perhaps it is also possible to interpret the statement by the Lateran Council as being more directly aimed against certain heretical twistings of the doctrine, but that otherwise the Council (and any other ecclesiastical authority) simply records a tradition without feeling particularly strongly about it.

But suppose the descent is a reality in our lives; suppose it is somewhere hidden at the core of our existence, perhaps without us always being conscious of it—is it then not crucial to confess that the Son of God is in it, that his presence does something to it? Our profession of faith is not that there is a descent, but that *Christ* descended into hell; just as I do not profess solemnly that there is death, but that Christ died, that death is died by the Son of God and that death will therefore be never the same again. The fact itself that Christ died is not interesting or worthy of special mention, for dying is something that all people do. Death, the descent into the abyss, is in a special way a reality of human existence, the conclusive experience from which life receives its meaning, which waits in clouded silence for the redemptive Word of God.

*The sons of god and the daughters of men*

I have argued something similar a few months ago in this magazine when talking about angels.<sup>1</sup> Angels (or the sons of god) must be seen as the structural elements of the divine sphere in which human existence is conceived to rest. The divine dimension of existence itself is not an object of faith. It is simply there, mere givenness. We should recognize these angelic elements as the texture of the divine, elements requiring structuring (or restructuring when things went wrong, when the splendour of the immortal God is turned into images shaped like mortal man—Rom. 1, 23). The divine must be two-dimensional, the structuring of given elements, so that something can happen within it, so that it can tell its own story and be autonomous, instead of merely filling a gap in the world, and so being degraded to what is basically a worldly category.

And so the angelic is something highly ambiguous: good and fallen angels intertwined. Angels are good for they protect man and make God possible to him. The divine is not just unshaded light and sun, burning out all man's religious aspirations, so that the higher in man withers and only the bareness of the secular remains. Out of the sons of god an angelic pattern is woven that screens us from the burning light that otherwise would cast no shadow and from where no meaning can be bestowed. For what can it mean to be good in general, how can man strive for perfection if perfection does not come to him in broken clues? What is the answer to the chaos of human passions if it is not order, order that needs to be expressed in law, the law that is from the angels (Gal. 3, 19)?

Man stands between day and night, light and darkness. He is the lord of the earth because there is in him the lord of heaven, because he is angelic. He is born from the dark womb of the earth, and it is to this earthly darkness that he will return in death. And the pulsation of this relationship is called 'passion', the natural urge of submerging

<sup>1</sup>*New Blackfriars*, June, 1971.

and rising. But he cannot find in the passions his fulfilment, achieve his self-identity, for his reason will always be in the way. We cannot have the dark knowledge of pure sensuality because we cannot find fulfilment as dark involuntary beings. And with envy we look at the animals: they can be spontaneous, can be themselves in their natural instincts and urges. In our case such a spontaneity would always be 'deliberate', involving a decision. What are for the animal mere instincts are for man expressions of desire and longing. And there is only one way for man to live out his self-identity, his immediacy: by suspending his passions, capturing his drives and emotions in one moment of perfection. This is the angelic life: the spirit released from the tension between soul and body.

Angels are good because they are the realization of man's aching desires and longings, the supreme ideals and perfection that man meets on his way to his destination in God. They are the divine as turned towards its own inside, towards Yahweh the Most High, with open hands carrying and presenting for redemption the water of man's life, a life that is now suspended (inevitably) and that wants to flow without the threat of becoming a chaotic and destroying torrent.

And while the angels are turned towards the sun, away from man, we can see only their backs. Looking up to God, we see the darkness within him: the shadow of the angels through whom we are connected with him. The darkness in God, who gives life and who takes it away, is the shadow which is cast by death. The brightness of the angelic perfection is, paradoxically, the shadow of death. For is it not the need to die that necessitates the angels? I speak of 'need', thinking of a willing act, Christ willingly going down into the deeps of the earth. For death is more than the inevitability which it is in the animals. It is truly a need that cannot be satisfied in the passions: a need for the dark knowledge of sensuality. For in man this is only achieved when the mind and the known world are drowned in darkness—everything must go—there must be a deluge. We have got to be dissolved before we can know what spontaneity really is, we have to die before we shall know what life really is, we have to go down again into the womb so as to be born a new man.

This then is the knowledge which we have when we see the back of the angels as the darkness in God. In the angelic perfection we see in ourselves—as a threat—that we have to die, both inevitably and as a need. And that is, of course, the sort of knowledge we would rather not have. We do not like what we see and we fear the shadow of death. We want to see only light and brightness. Let the angels show only perfection and divinity, let the sons of god turn away from the Most High and show their radiant faces to men. Let them turn to man, come down and have intercourse with the human race. It is our passionate life, crying out for perfection, that seduces the angels (Gen. 6). When the angels turn their faces to man, the Most

High will be hidden behind their deceiving brightness: there will be no God distinguished from the angels, and no angels distinguished from God.

This shows how much the angels are involved in our redemption. Christ had to find the angels and show himself to them in his victorious death (I Tim. 3, 16); he had to plant the cross in the darkness of God, in the belly of the monster. He had to disarm the Principalities and Powers and expose them, make a public spectacle of them (Col. 2, 15).

*The reality of the angelic myth*

Or is all this perhaps no more than poetic language, a way of speaking about heaven because we cannot see or have any comprehensive knowledge of divine affairs? Perhaps it is; perhaps it is indeed only mythological speculation because heaven is too near to God to know anything about. But it can be brought home in the descent. In the descent of Christ into hell we can in fact experience the exposing of the angels, the deprivation of their illusory authority, and the subjugation of the angelic ideologies to the reality of God's creation. The descent of Christ is nothing other than his preaching to the spirits, his going down into darkness that is hidden through the angelic splendour, his forcing his way into their sinister superiority and the deceptive height of religious perfection (the plastered tombs of the pharisaic ideals). The descent and the ascent are in fact the two sides of the same coin:

'He ascended into the heights with captives in his train; he gave gifts to men.' Now, the word 'ascended' implies that he also descended to the lowest level, down to the regions beneath the earth (Eph. 4, 8-9).

I believe that there is much illusion in what we now call so confidently 'the modern world-view'. It is, for example, an illusion to think that the notion of death becomes any clearer when such 'mythological fringes' as the descent into hell are removed.

There are the crude, physical facts of dying and being dead: a question of illness or meeting with an accident, of ageing, the mechanism running out. Nothing special, nothing to worry about: all things come to an end.

But that is not death, always assuming of course that it is not 'unrealistic' to get upset by the death of our beloved ones, to shed tears, to suffer and to need comfort; that it makes sense to commemorate and to refuse to accept death as final, as the mere termination of life. Death is not simply a matter of ceasing to exist, but it is the consummating experience from which life receives its meaning. One cannot really prove this; ultimately it is a question of option: the assumption that people are ontologically different from things, so that their death is more than the mere physical act of dying and being dead. These objective facts become the carriers

of a meaning in which the whole of human existence is summed up, the incomprehensible experience of consummation to which all experiences in life are chained as to an invisible point, hidden under the water. Death is irrevocable, and here life's perspective is fixed for ever, all threads are pulled together once and for all, they are woven into a pattern that shall not be changed any more. In death John becomes John in a frighteningly real way, the wicked shall be judged wicked for ever, and the just cannot return from his justice any more. Then in death each man is allotted his predestined place in history: the story of mankind is anchored more firmly each time death is died by people of all generations. And so, when the individual soul goes down into its own absolute silence, it blends and fuses with history, and it is borne over all the generations that have lived.

Death is cosmic, it is in reality the wider dimension in which existence rests. Death is the divine as the ultimate meaning of life. Death is not a single moment, but it is a moment which has the mythical density of the 'in the beginning', a density that extends over the whole of life. And in order to be such a meaning of existence death must show a structure similar to that of life: it must have a beginning and an end, an origin and a fulfilment: a story. Something must happen in death, something must be going on. There is a going down and a rising again, descent and ascent intertwined, giving to dying that historical dimension without which it would not be the cosmic meaning of life.

### *I Peter*

Let us now then turn to I Peter 3, 18–4, 6, which I shall quote in full from the Jerusalem Bible. But before we look at this text it is useful to consider the following. These lines may sound a bit peculiar in our ears, but they are in fact a constructive interpretation of Genesis 6, where it is recorded how, before the Flood, the sons of god were seduced by the daughters of men. We have already alluded to this episode, which in those early years of Christianity was universally regarded as being crucial in the history of mankind. The seduction of the sons of god was not something far back in the past, but a moment of mythic significance in which the whole of human history rests. Throughout the New Testament we find implicit or explicit references to this episode as it was recorded and understood in the many versions of the late Jewish literature.

Why, Christ himself, innocent though he was, had died for the guilty to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people 'by water', and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe. That water is a type of baptism which saves you now, and which is not washing off the physical dirt but a pledge made to God from a good

conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, now that he has made the angels and dominations and powers his subjects.

Think of what Christ suffered in this life, and then arm yourselves with the same resolution that he had: anyone who has in this life bodily suffering has broken with sin, because for the rest of his life on earth he is not ruled by human passions but only by the will of God. You spent quite long enough in the past living the sort of life that pagans live, behaving indecently, giving way to your passions, drinking all the time, having wild parties and drunken orgies and degrading yourselves by following false gods. So people cannot understand why you no longer hurry off with them to join this flood which is rushing down to ruin, and then they begin to spread libels about you. They will have to answer for it in front of the judge who is ready to judge the living and the dead. And because he is their judge too, the dead had to be told the Good News as well, so that though, in their life on earth, they had been through the judgment that comes to all humanity, they might come to God's life in the spirit.

The receivers of these consoling and encouraging words were Christian minorities living in the cities of Asia Minor, who had pledged themselves through the sacrament of baptism to a distinctive way of life amidst a hostile world. It is difficult to say what exactly constituted this distinctive pattern of behaviour. Presumably in the liturgical commemoration of the mysteries of Christ in their own places of worship, and possibly in a strict observation of a certain tradition within the Jewish law. But that is not so much the issue here. The real point is that these Christians tried to do the right things and did not give way to their passions, and that yet they had to suffer. It is true that a certain amount of suffering should not be excluded from the lives of the justified, for there is on the one hand the uncomfortable task of being ascetic so as to subdue the passions, and on the other there still awaits the punishment for sins committed previous to conversion. But here was a sort of suffering that threatened to upset everything they stood for and in which they so firmly believed. They were persecuted because they were doing the right things; they suffered because they were innocent.

This problem reminds us of the one discussed in the Book of Job. Job was a just man, and yet he had to suffer. The situation is slightly different, though. Job had to suffer *although* he was a just man, while these Christians suffered *because* they were justified. That is not to say, however, that the discussion in the Book of Job is completely irrelevant. Far from it, for in a sense it can be said that Job also suffered because he was justified. Remember how this story is introduced by a description of the heavenly court: the divine judgment, Yahweh and the sons of god. But Satan (who was among them) said, 'You judge Job a good man, and that he is indeed. But would your judgment still stand if Job was not so well off?' So permission was given to make things very hard for Job; it was a challenge to the

divine judgment. God was asked to withhold judgment, because it was too hasty, too momentous. Job had to live his life to the full, unto death, so as to reveal what was really in him. The divine judgment is suspended because it must extend to the whole of human existence, and the sons of god were not permitted either to reward or to destroy. In the later Jewish literature this finds expression in the imprisonment of the sons of god in the abyss of the earth (or desert and such-like places from where existence is threatened by death). It means that the divine judgment patiently awaits the completion of human life, so that conversion will still be possible. But at the same time there will also be the enticing voices of the angels in prison that lure man into a perfection that ultimately leads to total destruction.

Now, it was felt, baptism did not have the liberating effect that was expected; quite the opposite. Instead of freeing the Christians from the spirits in prison it had brought them nearer, more threatening than ever. This is the situation that is analysed in the letter and which will lead to a deeper penetration into the mysterious ways of God.

To what extent are the Christians themselves to be blamed for their suffering? The writer of the letter suggests that they could have been demonstrating too much of an esoterical attitude, and he asks them to state plainly and clearly to the pagans what the Christian faith is all about. The author also shuns any other form of religious fanaticism, and he apparently prefers the Christians to leave the social order as it is, with slaves obedient to their masters, etc. After having said that, the main issue becomes even more pressing. Why baptism, why should we deliberately go down into the depth of existence, into the deep waters of the flood that is caused by the sons of god? Why should we play with fire and risk the confrontation with the spirits in heaven? Is not the divine perfection waiting for us, obtained by Jesus Christ, and did we not say 'yes' to it?

We see then how the actual experience of suffering and death (i.e. suffering because of innocence) leads the Christians away from certain (Gnostic) religious attitudes (man is by nature Gnostic, by nature a believer in angels), and becomes a constructive factor in an appraisal of baptism as the real unification with the mystery of Christ. There is only one place where angels can be truly met and where a really liberating confrontation is possible. Not in heaven but in the abyss of existence into which we descend through baptism. When you look up to the skies, at the ideal of mankind, you may see the angelic splendour, and you do not realize that it hides the divine. The Gnostic says, 'I can see my destination, I can see the divine glory and recognize it as my abode.' For such a man there is no suffering, and he does not reckon with the final confrontation with God, deep inside himself, in the consummative experience of death from where life receives its meaning. We prefer the knowledge of the

angelic splendour to the realistic experience of the abyss. We are truly in the power of the angels.

So the angels have to be exposed, made a public spectacle, and the deception of their glory needs to be proclaimed. In heaven they are, indeed, but the place for the confrontation is under the earth, in death, in the negative experience of the divine, in the experience of the darkness of God. 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'

But no man of the earth can ever meet death as squarely as this, for suffering belongs to him and his condition of chaotic sinfulness: it can always be interpreted as punishment or as a dictated need to discipline the body. The real confrontation presupposes radical innocence, the innocence of the one who has never been under the spell of the sons of god. Christ's dying and being raised are not two isolated moments that are applied, as from the outside, to human history, giving satisfaction for what I have misdone. No, dying and rising are linked in the descent (and ascent) and made into one story, the cosmic happening in which I participate and which is the meaning in which human existence rests.

That is the reason why the innocence of my suffering is so important, the suffering (which is God's rejection) of my angelic efforts to be a good man. It leads me into an understanding (at the level of experience) of the death that is died by Christ. Correct behaviour itself (the law) does not bring salvation, and it does not liberate us from angelic oppression. Rather, the demands of the law may bind us to the angelic illusion. I hope I am not suggesting that we must not try to do the right thing, that our lives should be without moral or other perspectives, for to think that we can be fully spontaneous in our drives and our instincts is an even worse rational illusion. No, let us strive for the higher things, by all means, for the things that are above. But then we will have to recognize that we shall be defeated in our highest aspirations, that a contradictory way of life will present itself and impose itself, often violently. The death of the innocent, the man whose values are not recognized or are even rejected by the world; he is eventually left utterly alone in the silence of death. Then he may be tempted to take his ideals for final and beyond discussion, not as exploratory suggestions towards fulfilment; he may be tempted to put his faith in his ideals precisely there where they are illusions.

Christ descended into hell so as to expose the illusory nature of the Powers and Principalities, and we proclaim this fact in our Creed, for it is our liberation. But we are not merely referring to a fact outside us and in the past. Proclaiming the descent is admitting Christ into the depths of our existence, into the abyss where our own angelic illusions need to be exposed.