

Jesus' Descent into Hell

In 1533 Martin Luther preached a sermon at Torgau on Christ's descent into hell. Here is part of it: The Scripture passages he had chiefly in mind were Ps 16 and Acts 2:21-27.

... "Christ also descended into hell in order to deliver us also from it, since we were to be held in it as prisoners... However, I shall not discuss this article in a profound and subtle manner, how it was done, or what it means to "descend into hell", but adhere to the simplest meaning conveyed by these words, as we must represent it to children and uneducated people... Therefore, whoever would not go wrong or stumble had best adhere to the words and understand them in a simple way, as well as he can. Accordingly, it is customary to represent Christ in paintings on walls, as He descends, appears before hell, clad in a priestly robe, and with a banner in His hand, with which He beats the devil and puts him to flight, takes hell by storm, and rescues those who are His. Thus it was also acted the night before Easter as a play for children. And I am well pleased with the fact that it is painted, played, sung, and said in this manner for the benefit of simple people. We, too, should let it go at that, and not troubles ourselves with profound and subtle thoughts about how it may have happened...

"However, since we cannot but conceive thoughts and images of what is presented to us in words, and are unable to think of it or understand anything without such images, it is appropriate and right that we view it literally, just as it is painted, that He descended with the banner, shattering and destroying the gates of hell; and we should put aside thoughts that are too deep and incomprehensible for us... But we ought... simply to fix and fasten our hearts and thoughts on the words of the Creed, which says, 'I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dead, buried, and descended into hell', that is, in the entire person, God and man, with body and soul, undivided, 'born of the Virgin, suffered, died, and buried.' In like manner I must not divide His person here either, but believe and say that the same Christ, God and man in one person, descended into hell. He did not remain in it; as Psalm 16:10 says of Him: 'You will not leave My soul in hell, or suffer Your Holy One to see corruption.' By the word 'soul' He, in accordance with the language of the Scripture, does not mean, as we do, a being separated from the body, but the entire man, the Holy One of God, as He here calls Himself... Certainly it did not take place in a bodily and tangible manner, although we can only paint and imagine it in a coarse and bodily way and speak of it in pictures...

"Such, therefore is the plainest manner to speak of this article, that we may adhere to the words and cling to this main point, that for us, through Christ, hell has been tom to pieces and the devil's kingdom and power have been utterly destroyed. That was the purpose for which He died, was buried, and descended, that hell should no longer harm or overwhelm us, as Christ Himself says, in Matthew 16: 18: 'I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I shall build My church, and the forces of hell will not overpower it.'"