

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the second Sunday after Pentecost (6/23), 2019

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

One of the great images depicted in innumerable icons through the ages has been of the Harrowing of Hell...that moment when, as we say in the Creed, Christ descended into Hell...and rose again from the dead.

It is an astonishing and breath-taking tenet of our faith, for, by it, we aver that the power of Hell over us is, once for all, broken and that we can, if we will, walk in a freedom which humankind never knew before. Enslaved to sin and unable to break its hold on us since we were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, now, as followers of Christ, we believe that we can come to a new manner of life...perhaps not perfectly...but one that has the possibility of attaining salvation...*salvus*...literally translated from the Latin, health and wholeness.

As I said, astonishing...breath-taking. Life does not have to be a journey concerned only with, in de Montaigne's words, "build(ing) the house of death." It can now be a journey in which Emmanuel journeys with us...can be sensed...understood. A journey no longer hopelessly given over to the powers of this world but to the powers of another reality...one of light and hope and possibility.

Most of the depictions I have seen of that moment...the Harrowing of Hell...have shown a triumphant Jesus trampling Satan and his army under his feet...striding triumphantly from the raging fires and billowing smoke of Hell towards something of peace and hope.

There is one icon, however, that has stayed with me far more powerfully than any of the others I have seen. It was displayed many years ago at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut. I don't recall how I happened to attend the exhibition, but I did. As I noted, I have never quite escaped the power and, I might add, truth of what I saw there.

The icon I saw depicts Christ, no longer in the death of the tomb...but triumphantly alive...strong and vital...striding forward in great majesty. Trampled under his feet are, indeed, Satan and all the forces of darkness as well as the twisted and crumpled iron gates of Hell itself. On his right and on his left are depicted two human beings...one male and one female. Each is held firmly by the hand by Christ as he strides forward. The humans, we are to understand, are Adam and Eve...finally to be redeemed from sin and death...brought out into the light...by the power of Christ's resurrection...and the Harrowing of Hell.

A glorious moment. And yet...and yet...as I looked upon this beautifully executed icon those many years ago, I realized that Adam and Eve, rather than joyously following Christ from Hell, were, in fact, struggling with all their might to escape his grasp and stay where they have been.

And today we hear of Jesus coming upon the man we know as the Gerasene demoniac, and that poor soul, tormented beyond belief, rather than welcoming the possibility of healing, screaming out at Jesus, “What have you to do with me...do not torment me.” He is essentially begging to be left alone. The possibility is right at hand to end the hell he has endured we are told “for a long time,” and he tells it to go away. Leave me where I am!

Can you imagine?

And look what follows. Jesus doesn't listen to him and, in fact, drives the demons out of him. The swineherds who are in the area witness what has gone on, and, they too, essentially cry out, “Get out of here.” They are, we are told, “...seized with great fear.”

It is as if the entire lot of them want to stay in Hell...want nothing to change.

Can you imagine?

I can.

How often do we find ourselves miserable, slaves to addictions, behaviors, ways of life, and warped relationships that we will not seek the grace to change. We would rather stay in hells of our own creation than risk the possibility of change...the possibility that life may become something we cannot be as certain about as we can be if nothing changes.

To remain in Hell because we are too afraid of what it might be like in the light of new possibilities...the uncertainties of not knowing exactly what to expect. To be utterly unwilling to risk the possibility and uncertainty of new ways of life because we are comfortable with the way things are now...even if we know we are in Hell. We know what to expect!

What is there in each of our lives that needs to change? What is there that is keeping us enslaved? What is there that makes life feel an awful lot like Hell...even if it is comfortable, and we know exactly what to expect? What is it we are terrified of changing?

Each of us has our own answers, and each of us can confront them...if we will...or not.

Christ has done what is necessary to break the bonds of Hell. Christ stands on the broken gates. Perhaps, as he did with the Gerasene Demoniac, he will act without our asking, but, perhaps, as is more often the case, he will not. Far wiser for each of us, it strikes me, to ask ourselves if we will grasp his hand and follow him into the light and peace he offers...or will we pull back?