

Christ's Descent into Hades¹

The Resurrection of Christ is the greatest event ever to take place in history. It is celebrated by the Church beginning on Great Friday evening when we have the Matins for Holy Saturday. When Christ is placed in the tomb (the hymn exclaims, "O happy tomb!") and of His own will descends into the nethermost parts of the earth, we are already celebrating the Resurrection. That is why for the Vesperal Liturgy on Holy Saturday, the church is already decorated for Pascha, and we chant about Hades groaning because his authority has been destroyed; we also chant such phrases as "Praise ye the Lord," "Bless the Lord," "Shout with jubilation unto the Lord," and "Arise, O God," that show our joy in the Resurrection.

This Saturday celebration of the Resurrection is also seen in the holy iconography of the Feast. The Church regards the icon of the Descent into Hades as the true icon of the Resurrection. This is done for theological reasons. First, because no one actually saw our Saviour when He arose, and second, because the essence of the Feast is the death of death and the destruction of the Devil's power, which is what is depicted on the icon of the Descent into Hades.

The image of Hades, or Scheol, which is the Hebrew word, is used symbolically by Holy Scripture to point to the power of death and the devil. In the Old Testament it was spoken of as the realm of the dead, a place in the lowest part of the earth. Thus, in the Paschal Canon we chant, "Thou didst descend into the deepest parts of the earth." Hades is often personified, as in the hymns on Holy Saturday, for example: "Today Hades doth cry out with groaning: It would have been to my profit had I never received Him Who was born of Mary, for He came upon me and dispelled my power. He crushed the gates of brass, and, as God, He raised the souls that I held captive aforetime."

The Apostle Peter speaks about Christ preaching repentance to those in Hades in his first epistle: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Pet. 3:18-19). And again in the same epistle: "For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might

¹ Much of this article is based on Chapter 10, "The Resurrection of Christ," in Metropolitan Hierotheos's book *The Feasts of the Lord*.

be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit (1 Pet. 4:6).

In St. John Chrysostom's Catechetical Homily, which is read during the Liturgy on Pascha, we hear of the reaction of Hades when he encountered Christ: "He was embittered . . . he was mocked. . . he was slain . . . he was cast down. . . he was fettered." It says that through Christ's death on the Cross, Hades took on a mortal body and found himself face to face with God. He took earth and encountered heaven.

St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, wrote a marvelous and moving homily on Christ's descent into Hades where he describes all that happened there.² He begins his homily with the following words: "What thing is this? Today there is great silence upon the earth, great silence and stillness, verily great silence, for the King sleeps. The earth was frightened and became still, for God fell asleep in the flesh and raised up those who from ages past were sleeping." This is why many people try to keep Holy and Great Saturday as a day of silence, and in the monastery and convent where there are many chiming clocks, even the clocks are stilled in order to accentuate the silence. It is a holy time of anticipation while our Saviour is among the dead.

In vivid words St. Epiphanius says [we paraphrase a little], "Let us descend with Him, as we rejoice together, to the common prison of Hades where both righteous and unrighteous from ages past are sleeping." Christ descended into Hades "divinely, in warlike... lordly fashion accompanied not by twelve legions of angels, but by thousands, myriads, tens of thousands of thousands of angels." Before Christ reached the sunless prison of Hades, Gabriel, the leader of the heavenly hosts, arrived to announce the coming of Christ, for moreover it was he who gave the good news to the Theotokos. He said, "Lift up your gates, O ye princes." Then the archangel Michael cried, "and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates." The Powers of the angels said, "Stand aside, ye iniquitous gate-keepers." And the other authorities: "Be broken, unbreakable bonds... Fear, ye lawless tyrants!" Christ appeared and caused great fear, tumult, and horror. Whereupon the leader of Hades cried out loudly, "Who is the King of glory?" Then all the powers of heaven cried, "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty and strong and invincible in war."

Then St. Epiphanius describes wonderfully Adam's conversation with Christ. Adam heard Christ's footsteps approaching, just as he had heard

² To read the entire homily, see *The Lamentations of Matins of Holy and Great Saturday* published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston, MA.

them in Paradise after his transgression and disobedience. Then he had felt trepidation and fear, but now he experiences joy and gladness. The Lord says to Adam, "My sleep shall wrest you from the sleep of Hades. Wherefore arise, let us go hence. The foe led thee out of Paradise; yet no more shall I restore thee to Paradise, but to a celestial throne." And when the master had said this and more besides, Adam, being united with Him inwardly, rose up, and Eve arose as well, and the bodies of many others who in faith had fallen asleep from ages past arose also, preaching the Master's resurrection on the third day."

Christ descended into Hades to conquer and enslave the devil, who at that time was the ruler of death and Hades; He did it to destroy death and the devil's power. He did it in order to fill all things with the light of His divinity, and He did it to forgive sins and preach redemption there, as He had on earth, that the whole of mankind, including those who had died before our Saviour's incarnation, would hear the good news, and the righteous would be liberated and arise with Christ's arising.

So the Divine Liturgy that we have on Holy and Great Saturday is the first Liturgy of Pascha when we celebrate the liberation of those whom Hades held captive. And as we chant, "Arise, O God, judge the earth," the priest sprinkles the whole church with flowers and dried palms symbolizing how God has brought us from death unto life and showing with what overwhelming joy all creation now celebrates.

Why do we have the loaf called the Artos on Pascha?

The word *artos* (ἄρτος) is a Greek word meaning bread, although it is no longer used in that sense in modern Greek, but refers especially to a special loaf blessed during church services. *Artos* is the word that we use to refer to the five loaves that are blessed at the *artoklasia* when we have a *liti* on the eve of great feasts. On Pascha the *Artos* is a single larger loaf with a seal or icon of the Resurrection depicted on the top, and this loaf is placed on a table at the iconostasis before the icon of Christ. At the end of the Paschal Liturgy, the priest blesses the *Artos* and sprinkles it with Holy Water. It remains there all during Bright Week, and it is the custom for the faithful, on entering the Temple, to kiss the *Artos* as a way of greeting the Risen Christ. On each day during Bright Week, if there is a service, it is also the custom to carry the *Artos* in solemn procession around the church. In monasteries the

Artos is carried to trapeza after the Divine Liturgy every day in Bright Week where, after the meal, it is ceremoniously lifted up as all cry out "Christ is risen!" At the end of the Liturgy on Bright Saturday, the priest says another prayer over the Artos, and it is then broken and distributed to the people.

The blessing of the Artos takes place to honor the glorious Resurrection of our Saviour. While living on earth, the Lord called Himself the Bread of Life, saying: *I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and He who believes in me shall never thirst* (St. John 6:35). For forty days after the Resurrection the Apostles had their meals with the risen Christ (*vid. Acts 10:41*), and they broke bread together. Then, after the Ascension, they remembered the Saviour's words, "*Lo, I am with you always*" (St. Matthew 28:20), and with fervent faith they felt the invisible presence of the Lord, and as a natural expression of that faith and their desire to keep a constant remembrance of Him with them, when they were together at meals, they left unoccupied the place where He had lain at table and they placed a piece of bread at His place. And, on each occasion when the meal was over, as they gave thanks, they would lift up the small loaf and say "Christ is risen!"

After the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles dispersed to various distant places to preach the Gospel, they would, if possible, along with the new Christians in that region, perpetuate this custom. Later the Church Fathers applied this daily custom of the disciples only to the Feast of Pascha where an actual loaf of bread visible there in the church before the eyes of the faithful serves as a remembrance of the invisible presence of the risen Lord among us.³

With Whom are we Talking?

As Bishop Demetrius reminded us when he was here, when we stand before our icons and pray, we need to remember that we are actually talking with **God!** This means we are talking with Someone Who is the Creator of the universe, Who is almighty, omnipresent, all-good, and Who is perfect love, Who, out of that love, let Himself be crucified for us. This is a stupendous thing! How can we not fall down before Him and worship Him with awe and thanksgiving? And when we enter the church, where week after week the bloodless Sacrifice is accomplished, wherein our Saviour offers Himself to us physically in His Holy Body and Blood, how can we just

³ Much of this article comes from Bulgakov's *Настольная книга*, Kharkov, 1900.

enter casually into such a holy place without first praying, "O Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. I, who am nothing, am not worthy to enter Thy holy temple."

So let us practice these thoughts whenever we begin our prayers and whenever we enter the church, and in time our prayer will become more fervent, and we will gradually increase in the necessary virtue of humility.

But, lest we get discouraged because of this and perceive our God in His greatness as too far away to make contact with us, let us remember that at the same time that we are trying to bring to mind our lowliness and our unworthiness in comparison to all of these amazing and perfect qualities of God, we know that our Saviour is our Friend and our Helper in all things—that He embraces us and holds our hand and guides us through every difficulty. So we must find a balance in these thoughts, and most of all, pray, and keep praying that God will help us pray.