



And the Lord stretching forth his hand, said: Come unto me, all ye my saints which bear mine image and my likeness. Ye that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death condemned by the tree ...

.... And the Lord stretched forth his hand and made the sign of the cross over Adam and over all his saints, and he took the right hand of Adam and went up out of hell, and all the saints followed him.

That was a passage from the Gospel of Nicodemus. It's not part of our canonical Scripture, but it tells the story of the "Harrowing of Hell" – in which Jesus breaks down the doors of the underworld and rescues the dead held captive there. This event is only hinted at in our New Testament (1 Peter 3.19 and 4.6). The Apostle's Creed gestures towards it with the words "he descended into Hades." But it is a very important element of some of the oldest beliefs and imagery in our tradition.

On the screen is an Orthodox icon of the Anastasis, the Resurrection. This icon doesn't represent the precise moment of resurrection, which cannot even be imagined.

Instead, it visualises the powerful and profound idea that Christ, after dying and being buried, descended still further in search of those lost in the darkness of death. The icon affirms that the deepest meaning of Christ's death and resurrection is rescue from our mortality, escape from the slavery of death.

In the words of the ancient hymn, "Christ has trampled down death by death, bestowing life on those in the tombs." In doing so, Christ destroyed the one "who has the power of death, that is, the devil." (Hebrews 2.14) This language doesn't need to be taken literally to be a strong proclamation of Love's victory over the most terrifying and painful aspects of human life.

We have been contemplating this Lent on Christ's death as "exodus," the fulfilment of God's rescue and release of all creation from bondage into newness of life. This icon invites us to comprehend the Paschal mystery through this lens of liberation from all that seeks to harm us, including our own capacity for harming others.

You can see Jesus, glowing luminous in the darkness, grasping Adam and Eve by the wrist and hauling them up out of their graves. Under Jesus' feet are the shattered gates of hell – which in some versions of this icon form a cross shape. There are also broken chains, keys and padlocks strewn around, and also the bound, shadowy form of Satan. Christ is standing on a bridge or platform of rock that spans a dark pit, and behind Adam and Eve are characters from the history of Jewish scripture – David, Solomon, the prophets, John the Baptist.

Rowan Williams writes beautifully about this icon:

...Jesus comes out of the depths of divine life bringing the immediate presence of divine activity into the furthest depths of human experience... The drama of this scene depicts an action of God which moves 'through' death...into the place where human beings languish...As his hand grasps the hands of Adam and Eve, Jesus goes back to embrace the first imaginable moment of rebellion and false direction in human life...

We are compulsive dividers, separators, and in these divisions we deny ourselves the life God is eager to give... Every one of the great separations humans have got used to is overcome in the person and the action and the suffering of Jesus... Christ stands on a precarious-looking bridge, as if he is the one who by the great risks and pains of his incarnation connects what we have pulled apart... It is as if he is reintroducing [Adam and Eve] to each other after the ages of alienation and bitterness that began with the recriminations of Genesis... A new human community becomes possible... one unaffected by any division between the living and the dead.¹

What Williams is picking up on here is this amazing, dynamic arc between Jesus, Adam and Eve, as he pulls them towards each other even as he pulls them out of their graves bridging with his risen humanity the separations caused by fear, blaming, rejection, and refusal of love. Adam and Eve function here as symbols of both the potential and the tragedy of being human.

“We are compulsive dividers,” Williams says, and it’s true. We divide body from mind and spirit, light from dark, conservative from liberal, East from West, and humanity from the rest of creation. We have done untold harm to the earth and one another by turning differences – especially those of race and gender – into occasions for dominance, exploitation and brutality.

The ultimate division, though, and the one that perhaps we are attempting to deny and defy in the ways we scapegoat and trample on one another, is the separation of the living and the dead – that separation that bereaves and horrifies us, that for many diminishes the value and meaning of our very existence and leaves us without hope.

Jesus does not leave us in that place. And neither does he “save us” by reaching down from heaven and plucking us up one by one into a rarefied existence where we can go on for ever in individual disembodied bliss untroubled by the messiness of the divisions we have left behind. That’s not what resurrection means. Resurrection is lived here and now, with other people.

¹ All italics are quotes from Rowan Williams *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with the Icons of Christ*.

Jesus, in his unbreakable relationship with the One he called the Father, brings the fullness of divine life and love into the depths of our lostness, our alienation, the graves we have dug for ourselves, the backs we have turned on each other. No matter how darkened our minds, how self-destructive our choices, how forgetful of God we have become, the living Christ enters our prison and comes in search of the true humanity that remains in us. And, when we are found, we are grasped by the hand in a way that liberates us back into relationship, back into community – even a communion of saints that includes those who according to human timelines died long ago.

Death is the last frontier, but in Christ it is nothing to fear. The accuser who once tormented, seduced, deceived and prosecuted us, who took our human goodness and turned us against each other, has been defeated in Christ's resurrection. The doors that were locked against us have been broken open, and the chains that bound us have been cut.

We can still live in them, of course. We can accept the "frozenness" of lives cut short by resentment or blame, we can pull our hands away and turn away from those Jesus asks us to reach towards. We can stay asleep and hidden when the living one comes into our dark night in search of us, we are free to refuse the light that shines in the depths of our self-pity or self-hatred.

But in the end, God wants to give us life. So much so, that God endured an unimaginable rupture within Godself to enter our utter lostness. It is only for us to turn towards the light, and trust the voice that reaches out a hand in the dark.

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