

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—— DID JESUS REALLY “DESCEND INTO HELL?”—BY FR. STEVE

A parishioner recently approached me and asked, “Father, did Jesus actually go into hell after He died? I don’t believe it because only bad people go there.” She was referring to a line in the Apostles Creed which says that “He descended into hell.” That line is omitted from the Nicene Creed, which we use here at Mass. (By the way, either creed can be used at Catholic Masses, although the Nicene Creed seems more often used in U.S. parishes, while Canadian Catholic churches tend to use the Apostles Creed, in accordance with local bishops’ directives.) The usual image we have when we hear about hell is of serious sinners in flaming eternal torment, with the devil and all his unholy angels being their horrible hosts. However, the understanding of “hell,” as used in the Apostles Creed, connects with the Old Testament understanding of “Sheol” in Hebrew or “Hades” in Greek—a place to which all the dead go. Before Jesus walked the earth, all the dead—the good and the bad—would go to one “underworld,” with no distinction there between the two. Several psalm verses mention this place of the dead—Sheol (Psalms 6:6, 16:10, 55:16, and 139:8). Isaiah 38:18 mentions this “nether world.”

In the late Old Testament period (within about 300 years before Jesus was born into the world), a belief in the resurrection of the dead to an afterlife started to take shape among the Jews, along with a division of the dead—the good in one part of the underworld and the bad in another. Gehenna is a term that was used to describe the bad section of the underworld. Three of the Gospels have Jesus using “Gehenna” to describe what awaits the wicked. (Check out Matthew, chapters 5, 10, 18 & 23; in Mark, chapter 9; and in Luke, chapter 12). If you look at Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, you’ll have an example of such an understanding, as the dead Lazarus was resting comfortably with Abraham on one side of a great chasm, while the dead rich man was in flaming torment on the other side.

Thus, when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven (as stated in both the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds), the gates of heaven were finally burst open to welcome all the good souls from all the earlier centuries who had been waiting for a Redeemer to guide them into such a blissful state of being. Thus, Jesus is said to have gone to the place of the dead to rescue the good souls and “bring them Home to Heaven,” so to speak. As the Church grew over the centuries, so would its understanding of hell as being not so much a place for all the dead anymore, but being an eternal place of punishment for those serious sinners who failed to repent of their sins and did not acknowledge Christ & His merciful love in their lives.

