

## **Lent 1 Year B, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

**Fr Peter Groves**

### **Reading: I Peter 3, Mark 1.12-15**

One of the saddest consequences of the Reformation was the effect that it had on what we might call cultural memory. Within a few generations, people were unable to speak the religious language of their forebears, and the words and images which nurtured those ancestors were lost seemingly for ever. This is the case if we think of the visual experience of worshipping Christians in England, for example, used to seeing brightly coloured churches decorated with garish pictures of saints and lurid depictions of judgement.

Another great chasm between ourselves and our past was created by the end of the so called medieval mystery plays. These dramas, common across Europe but particularly popular in England, were performed on festal holidays, and

on the Feast of Corpus Christi in particular. They are often wrongly thought to be called mystery plays because they enact the Biblical stories of salvation, but in fact the word mystery here means “secret”, and refers to the secrets of the craft guilds which made up the medieval city. Each guild would perform a play relevant to its trade – the plumbers would perform Noah’s flood, for example, and the bakers would act out the last supper.

The saddlers play is set in hell, and its action begins with the first man, Adam, who on hearing a noise calls his brethren and expresses his sudden hope that now, after four thousand years, liberation is nigh. Other prophets and patriarchs join in, ending with Moses and John the Baptist, only to be silenced by the devils who dismiss this idle talk. But still they hear a noise – a knocking, an insistent, increasing knocking, louder and louder until the doors themselves are commanded to break open by the voice of Christ himself in a psalm – Lift up your heads, you gates, that the King of Glory might come in. The gates of the

underworld burst open, death is defeated and we the audience have witnessed the harrowing of hell.

This harrowing of hell, or the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades, is the idea that at the point of his death, Christ descended into the underworld to smash the prison bars and release the captive patriarchs, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob etc, who had been languishing under the control of the prince of darkness and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The fact that this particular drama was performed by the saddlers guild reminds us that the medieval world of Knights and quests is very much a Christian tapestry, that the truest of knights was Christ, and the greatest of quests was the redemption of the world by his defeat of the powers of darkness. The enduring popularity of the drama is encountered by anyone who has seen Shakespeare's Macbeth, in which the famous Porter's scene, Here's a knocking indeed, is a transparent parody of the harrowing of hell.

Our epistle reading, from the first Letter of Peter, describes Christ as “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison”. That is the nearest one will find in the New Testament to a direct expression of this doctrine, and for that reason, some Christians have wanted to dismiss the image entirely, pointing out that our extract from I Peter is probably intended to convey something different: that, in the earliest times, there were rebellious spirits who would not accept the ways of God, and that the risen Christ proclaims his triumph to them, in a type of victory procession.

The dramatic images of the medieval plays are owed to later theological developments, and in particular a text called the Gospel of Nicodemus. But the idea that Christ conquers hell remains basic to Christian theology. When we say the Apostles creed we say “he descended into hell” without giving it much thought. That assertion is

there to emphasize the universality of Jesus' mission and ministry. The idea that Jesus physically went into a literal underworld and smashed it open, is not necessary to our faith. But the notion that there is no part of human existence, no aspect of creation, which is left untouched by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is very much an essential of proclaiming the gospel. The incarnation of Christ is God's decisive act, the climax of creation, the centrepiece of life and meaning. To assert that those who are already dead are redeemed by Christ is simply to assert that everyone is redeemed by Christ, something which ought not to be difficult for a Christian to celebrate.

Why focus upon it this morning? Experienced listeners to sermons might well have noticed that the preacher is far more likely to talk about the epistle when faced with a gospel passage only four verses long. But that's not the only reason. For the fact that Mark's gospel does not contain the extended temptation narrative with which we are

familiar from Mark and Luke, is itself a pointer to Mark's entire theology of redemption.

When Mark shows us Jesus being baptised, and then being led into the wilderness by the Spirit, he is narrating the beginning of something, just as he began his entire text with the words "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ". At the end of Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness, he is ready to begin his preaching ministry: the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel". The beginning of Jesus' ministry is the beginning of repentance, and the beginning of faith. It is not, however, the end of Jesus' struggle with temptation and with the powers of darkness. Quite the opposite. Jesus calls the fishermen to follow him, and they do, entering into their new beginning, but straight away we are plunged into cosmic battle. Jesus casts out unclean spirits, and heals the sick.

His quest is to engage with the enemies of God and defeat them. At first, the evangelist shows this

through straightforward narrative events – emerging successful from temptation by Satan, overcoming the demons who imprison the sick in body and mind. But as the gospel continues, that engagement, that battle, will become the more intense, and it will become the more intense precisely because we will not be able so clearly to see his opponents at work. It is no accident that when Peter protests that Jesus must not go to suffering and death, Jesus calls him Satan. The unclean spirits and the demonic powers might not jump off the page at us, but they will be more effectively, more insidiously present in the words and works of those who fear the journey to the cross and the culmination of the mission, the quest, of the Son of God.

Lent is our preparation for that mission. We begin it with dramatic actions, with ashes, with penitence, with all sorts of good intentions. But in the end it will not be about us, but about the one whom we follow. As the beginning of Lent recedes, our focus is not ourselves and our successes or

failures, it is the one whom we follow to Holy Week and Easter Day. All that we learn as disciples, all that God is teaching us about ourselves, will be contained, embraced and born anew in the drama towards which we are walking. The quest we are on is not our own, but the quest of Christ himself, and any triumph which we proclaim is the triumph of the one who embraces the cross and overcomes death itself.