

Year A

1 Peter 3:13-22

Isn't it odd that one of the least referred to, and most obscure events in Scripture is referenced in the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds; succinct and valued summations of early Christian belief? The so-called 'Harrowing of hell' is solely based on Ephesians 4:9 and 1 Peter 3:19-20 which refer to Jesus' descent to the place of the dead and to his preaching to spirits in prison, presumably after his crucifixion and before his resurrection. It's all very murky

and uncertain and sounds extremely odd in our rational, sceptical age. We might be tempted to ignore it and we might be embarrassed that its found in the Apostles' Creed in particular: after all it's not easy to avoid it in the most universally accepted of all the Christian creeds. And even if we belong to the most non-creedal traditions of Christianity, we still have a problem with this teaching appearing in the New Testament. So what can we say about it?

And before we get there we have an additional problem raised by our principal text in 1 Peter. The issue of baptism and its

claim for salvation. A minister doesn't easily forget the tears of an old woman who told the story of her son who was faithfully presented as an infant for christening, baptism. The baptism took place before God and the gathered congregation who prayed and made promises which were faithfully kept to the best ability of the people. But her son went astray in life. There was no sign that the baptism had any affect on him and furthermore any hope his dear mother had that things might be turned around were dashed by his early death. So what can we say about that too?

Isn't it strange that both these difficult issues may come into our thinking from the reading of this short passage in 1 Peter? Well, let's take them one at a time beginning with the issue of the Gospel message and those who have already died. Then we might see that the two issues are in fact closely related.

At the end of C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan entered the terrible castle, the domain of the evil White Witch. Aslan, the lion, a symbol of Christ restores to life the Narnians who had been turned to stone, that they might return to

fight against the White Witch's army. Their intervention turns the tide. In a similar vein, in *The Return of the King*, the third novel of *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Aragorn, the king, calls on the dead soldiers of the past to join forces with his army to fight the evil of Mordor. They assist him and the battle is turned in their favour.¹

Both authors are making a powerful theological point even though they may be reluctant to declare it explicitly. They are stating in similar ways that death is not the

¹ Lewis, C.S. 1950 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* London: Geoffrey Bles

Tolkien, J.R.R. 1955 *The Return of the King* London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd

end. Christ is more powerful than death. He, by his resurrection, is the Lord over death. I think we can easily go astray by wanting to say more than this regarding difficult New Testament texts. But the fact that death is not final is a strong assertion in itself and it challenges narrow views of Christ's reach and power and of course the scope of salvation.

Now how does that relate to the other problem. How do we cope with the issue of baptism and salvation? Well, as we can say that Christ is more powerful than death so likewise he is more powerful than our

substandard lives. Baptism is concerned with identity and the claim of ownership that God has over those presented to him for baptism. That's the whole thrust of the argument here in 1 Peter 3 regarding suffering for what is right, suffering in the same manner as Christ. Our identity is sealed by our baptism that declares that God loves us: full stop. There is no need to clarify or place limits on that love. Baptism symbolises the initial action of God towards us: unconditionally. The purpose of baptism is not conversion. It is not compelling us to respond like machines with no wills of our

own. We are free to make our choices but we are being led to choose the identity of Christ whose mark is on us. As we choose him so our perception of the world changes. If we fail to choose him we are where we started and where we remain, dependent on the love of God and his mercy which is stronger than death and more powerful than our substandard lives.

Frederick William Faber wrote many great hymns but non greater than this:

“There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,

which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members

in the sorrows of the Head.

If our love were but more faithful,
we would take him at his word;
and our lives be filled with glory
from the glory of the Lord.”²

The problem does not lie with God, it lies with us. You see, we are inclined to be harsh with one another. Peter encouraged Christians to stand up for what they believe in but he insisted that we engage with others with gentleness and reverence. This is where we so often fall down. Christianity can be

² The Church Hymnary 3rd edition

plagued by dogmatism. We can become entrenched behind our beliefs that are acting as a kind of defensive wall against the perceived outsider. It's of course much easier to stay put and defend than it is to climb over the wall and engage with others. Effective engagement requires a willingness to respect the views of others especially when we do not agree. How many of us could speak with certainty about the difficult issues that have been raised this morning? - none of us.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland meets this week and there are, as

always, difficult issues to be debated. Commissioners will not find agreement on all issues and especially the ones they feel there should be no compromise on. However, the uncertainties of our text this morning should make all believers that wee bit more inclined to hold their views lightly. Could it be that we might be wrong from time to time? And even more significantly how do we go about disagreeing? Do we withdraw from one another? Do we desire to separate and associate only with people who think the same way as we do? That's why we have so so many denominations in Scotland today.

Remember we are to engage with gentleness and reverence.

I read recently the story of the goldfish and the soap.

At their school carnival, some children won four free goldfish, and so dad went out on Saturday morning to find an aquarium. The first few price ranged from £40 to £70. Then dad spotted it--right in the aisle: a discarded 10-gallon display tank, complete with gravel and filter--for a mere five pounds. Sold! Of course, it was very dirty, but the savings made the two hours of clean-up a breeze.

Those four new fish looked great in their new home, at least for the first day. But by Sunday one had died. Too bad, but three remained. Monday morning revealed a second casualty, and by Monday night a third goldfish had gone belly up. Dad called in an expert, a member of the church who had a 30-gallon tank. It didn't take him long to discover the problem: dad had washed the tank with soap, an absolute no-no. His uninformed efforts had destroyed the very lives he was trying to protect..... Sometimes in our zeal to clean up our own lives or the lives of others, we unfortunately use "killer

soaps"--condemnation, criticism, nagging, fits of temper. We think we're doing right, but our harsh, self-righteous treatment is more than they can bear.

At the heart of the mysteries of the text in 1 Peter this morning there is an openness to the other. We have to learn in our lives to relate well, to bless and encourage, because the mercies of our God are much bigger than we could ever imagine.