

The Apostles' Creed

Looking at our roots!

He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven.

Introduction

So far in our series on the Apostles' Creed, we have thought about what it means to believe; in the Father and then in the Son. Today we will think about the journey of the Son, from death to life to heaven.

Descended to the dead

The Apostles' Creed is rendered a little differently between the different Christian traditions. In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer it says, 'he descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven', in 'Gathering for Worship' it combines the first two parts. The modern world is a bit hell-o-phobic, and understandably so.

The reformer John Calvin believed that on the cross Jesus didn't only experience mortal death, he was submerged in hell itself. Hell, the place reserved for those (angelic and human) in sinful rebellion against God. It's not an easy thought to sustain, but hell describes the furthest place that we could possibly be from God. The Creed then suggests that even there, because of Jesus, God is present. Hell in Latin, which was the original creedal language, simply means beneath. The concept finds its biblical roots in Eph 4.10 'So the one who came down is the same one who went up, above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with his presence.' (GNB) Maybe more than describing the place of eternal punishment, the creed is describing the encapsulating presence of Jesus, who in relation to the Father and Spirit is within, above and beyond creation. In the Old Testament the Psalmist cries

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

It's also central to our reading, Peter says of Jesus 'He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits' (1 Peter 3:18b-19). Jesus descended to the dead, frees the dead, releasing them from their darkened imprisoned state. For us today, at the root of our faith we need to know that there is nowhere off-limits for Jesus, he can meet us wherever we are.

Rose again

As Christians, we are familiar with the idea of resurrection, though often entirely baffled by it - the idea of a dead man becoming a live one again. I remember talking with a deacon from a previous pastorate. I paraphrase the conversation; but he said something like, 'have you ever really thought about the resurrection, it's beyond belief.' He did believe, but if you

stop to think how that happened, you will not be able to offer a physical explanation. The resurrection is the miracle par-excellence.

Death is the end of mortal life. Humans can prolong life; sometimes we can resuscitate people, but we cannot reanimate a man dead for three days. God can, because God is beyond life and death as its creator. The Living Bible translates verse 21 of our reading, using baptism as a picture of what God does for us in Christ, buried and raised. Peter says that, by the way, is what baptism pictures for us: in baptism we show that we have been saved from death and doom by the resurrection of Christ; not because our bodies are washed clean by the water but because in being baptized, we are turning to God and asking him to cleanse our *hearts* from sin.

Resurrection is the life of God fully realised in the life of the believer. Suffering can make life look meaningless. Christ, the Son of God suffered; was his life meaningless? Not at all, even his suffering took redemptive value - 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.' 1 Peter 3:18a. Even our lives, suffering and all, surrendered to God are in the master's hands. Because God causes resurrection life to come from death, light explodes in darkness, love overpowers hate. Nothing is lost to God, God even reached into the cold heart of hell and resurrected Jesus, nothing is lost to God.

Ascended into heaven

Ascension Day is on 26th May. On that day we remember that after Jesus' resurrection, when he had spent time with the disciples, he ascended into heaven. Acts 1:8-9 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.'

Talking about the death and life of Jesus, David Wheaton links them, saying of Peter. 'He sees the glorification of Jesus not only as the divine sequel to his sacrificial death, but also a compelling reason for humankind to respond to him in faith'

Jesus didn't remain on earth, he took his rightful place as the cosmological King, he's not stuck on island earth. By faith in him, none of us are either.

Conclusion

The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus are vital to the Christian faith, which is captured and recited here in the creed. We must take time to reflect on what this means for us and trust God's promise that nothing that is surrendered to him will be wasted. Jesus was not wasted, neither will we be.

Questions

1. Jesus' descent into hell challenges us, how far are we willing to go to follow God?
2. The resurrection might feel unbelievable at times; how might we maintain faith our faith and strengthen the belief of others? Is there evidence for the resurrection around you?
3. The Ascension witnesses the cosmological Christ, who was once the crucified Christ; nothing is too great or small for God. How might we commit everything to God?