



The Parish of Saint Anthony Glen Huntly

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Homily at Mass 1st Sunday of Lent, Year C – 10 March 2019

In the Apostle's Creed we say something quite strange – that at his death on the Cross Jesus “descended into hell”. Where? we might ask. Hell – why should Jesus go down to Hell? Isn't Hell the place for unrepentant sinners, for those who deny God, or who even detest him so much that they wouldn't want to spend a minute in his presence? The Church's long held understanding, explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is that Jesus did not descend to the Hell where Satan is king, but rather to ‘Sheol’ – a place where the likes of Abraham and Isaac, King David, Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and all the holy men and women of the Old Testament waited in hope for the day when the Messiah would come from God not only to lead his faithful ones on earth but to free and bring to Heaven everyone who ever longed for him and hoped in God's promises.

You and I taste something of Hell in every experience of temptation; all those times, when our loyalty to God is tested, those occasions day by day where the Devil tries to convince us that this life is all there is, where things like money, our possessions, the praise of others, a sense of pride and domination over others is the goal of life, where we feel more in control, when I'm in charge and everyone – including God – is at my bidding.

The Gospel story of Our Lord's temptations in the desert gives us an insight into his experience of Hell – his face to face battle with Evil. Jesus has already been in the desert for 40 days – imagine it: hot, dry, dusty, rocks for a pillow, a cave for shelter, insects and biting bull ants. No food, no friends. In the Bible the desert is a place of testing, of deep inner searching, of ultimately an encounter with God. The Hebrew people had experienced this in their 40 years in the desert with Moses as their leader. Moses himself had spent 40 days on Mt Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments from God. Abraham and his son walked 40 days before offering Isaac on the altar. Noah, his family and the animals remained in the Ark during the 40 day flood. You and I embark today on 40 days of prayer, fasting and charity. This is the season of Lent.

The 4 Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John give us a full account of our Lord's life, ministry and teaching. We learn of his conception and birth, his mother Mary and Joseph. We learn his teaching on prayer, the moral life and Heaven. All his parables are familiar to us. Each Gospel gives us a dramatic, almost moment by moment, blow by blow description of his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death. The Gospels tell us about the sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation. The Gospels also provide for us the fantastic stories of Christ's resurrection and the mission of his Church: Go – preach – baptise!

The Gospels hide nothing from us about Our Lord's public ministry, his encounters with the sick, his patience with his apostles, his commitment to prayer, his divinity revealed in his humanity, his identity as the Son of God, a man like us in all things but sin. "He descended into Hell" the Apostle's Creed says – Jesus encounters the terror of Satan on every page of the Gospel: fickle human nature, devil possessed men, women even children, the hopelessness of the sick, the blind, the deaf and paralysed, lepers, pompous and arrogant political leaders: all of these things signs of what life is like without God, and how only God can make our lives whole, free, joyful, abundant, just, worthwhile.

The Gospel tells us about the 3 temptations Jesus experienced in the desert. But St Luke's account finishes today with one more ominous sign, like the tolling of a great bell. The Devil may have retired at the end of the Gospel story but St Luke tells us that he hadn't given up: he was to return "at the appointed time".

When was that to be? That appointment was made for a cruel Friday at Calvary – the day of Our Lord's crucifixion and death. That's an appointment that you and I have in our diary too. It is the goal of our Lenten discipline and efforts: Christ's cross and Satan's temptations. Which one do we hold on to more?