

A picture is worth 1000 words: Noah's ark and the harrowing of hell

MONDAY MAY 10th 1 PETER 3.13—4.11 A picture is worth 1000 words: Noah's Ark and the Harrowing of Hell



Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order to bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. 1 Peter 3.18-22

Resurrection can be a hard concept to get your head around. This section of 1 Peter uses two word-pictures that have been very influential in shaping Christian ideas: Noah's ark, and the harrowing of hell.

Occasionally a graveyard dispute hits the headlines, usually when somebody is not allowed to put up a memorial to a loved one because the graveyard authorities consider the image is unsuitable. I sometimes wonder what these authorities would make of the images we find in early Christian burial sites — very strange to our eyes, but powerfully expressing a resurrection hope that enabled people to hold onto their faith in hard times.



This picture of Noah's Ark is a good example. There are images like this all over the catacombs, the burial caves excavated by Christians from the second and third centuries around the city of Rome. In a place where the dead are laid to rest, what you need is an image of hope — not much in the way of words (and most people couldn't read anyway), but powerful images that tell a story. A picture is worth a thousand words.

Like most of the catacomb pictures, this picture tells a story about *resurrection*. It's not much like our idea of Noah's Ark — no animals, and not at all like a boat. In fact it's just a picture of a man standing in a box (which is what the word for "ark" actually means) holding up his hands in prayer. You can just see in the corner a dove bringing him an olive branch. Sometimes you can see waves tossing about the bottom of the box. It's a kind of pictorial shorthand for the story of Noah: floods raging below, Noah safe in the ark, the lid open to heaven, and God's messenger (the Holy Spirit) bringing a branch of the tree of life, a sprig of green that promises life.

Actually I think it's quite a good way of picturing what resurrection might feel like, even if you don't know Noah's story. In a place where the dead are shut away in little boxes, here is a man standing up, open and alive to God, holding out his hands to receive God's promise of eternal life. If you do know the story, it captures that moment where Noah looks round at a world of destruction, a world where all signs of life seem to have been wiped out, and the dove brings him the olive branch that shows that somewhere out there, beyond all despair, the green shoots of new life are appearing.

But Noah's story had a deeper resonance for those first Christians. They linked the floods of Noah's story to the waters of baptism, the terrifying floodwaters that symbolize the waters of death. When I'm preparing a family for baptism, I often ask them what they think the water symbolises. Cleansing and new life are two obvious

answers, and they're both right —symbols work at multiple levels. But water can also be dangerous and destructive. Baptism is a symbol of new birth and also of resurrection, of being saved from the waters of death by Jesus' risen life.

*Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck, says the Psalmist:
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying, and my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. (Psalm 69.1-3)*

If that's how you feel, Noah's picture is the one for you: bobbing along on the waves, kept safe in the ark by the power of God. And that's exactly what baptism does, according to St Paul: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism unto death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6.3-4)*

1 Peter also uses another picture of resurrection that became very important in Christian art, though it seems rather strange to us. *For this reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does (4.6).* When we say in the Creed, "He descended into Hell," this is what it's referring to: the "Harrowing of Hell". "Hell" here means "Hades" (*Sheol* in the Hebrew Bible), not a place of punishment but the shadowy storehouse of the spirits of the dead. The bit in between the Cross and the Resurrection became not just a place of waiting but a place of action, part of the triumph of the victorious Son of God.



I love this Icon of the Resurrection, because it shows us one way of understanding the mystery of the Cross — of the Cross not just as the *passion* (suffering) of Christ but as an *action*, a great triumphant act of salvation. Look first at the figure of Christ,

slightly off-centre, straddling and dominating the centre of the icon: decisive, joyful, bursting with energy. This is not a passive victim of circumstances, not a defeated idealist, but a carpenter with his sleeves rolled up, ready for action.

Now look at the Cross — no longer a scaffold, an instrument of torture, but a platform, a ladder, a bridge across the abyss. I know they're meant to represent the "bars" of Hell, but to me those two pieces of wood represent the wood of the Cross, nailed roughly together to plug a gap, to repair a breach — an impromptu platform for Christ to do his work. And what is that work? This is how the icon-painter imagines the harrowing of hell: Christ reaching out strong hands, one to Adam, one to Eve, reaching down to pull them up out of the pit, out of the abyss of darkness, breaking their chains and pulling them out to share his risen life.

You might say this is the final fulfilment of the Psalmist's vision at the end of Psalm 22, when the tragedy of dereliction is not cancelled but transcended, lament subsumed into praise: an outpouring of praise that crosses the boundaries of space and time:

*How can those who sleep in the earth bow down in worship,
Or those who go down to the dust kneel before him?
He has saved my life for himself; my descendants shall serve him:
This shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.
They shall come and make known his salvation to a people yet unborn:
Declaring that he, the Lord, has done it. (Psalm 22.29-31)*

But the vision of the icon daringly goes beyond the Psalmist's conception, reaching out not only to the future but to the past. What the icon reveals is the astoundingly bold conception that the saving effects of the Cross transcend all the boundaries of space and time, reaching forward to future generations and back to liberate Adam and Eve (and by implication the whole of humanity) from the kingdom of the dead, where God cannot be praised because the dead have no voice.

What we see here is a vision of Christ as the new Adam, setting free the whole human race, reversing the effects of Adam's disobedience by a life of total obedience — obedience unto death — and thus restoring the free and confident relationship with God that was broken by the Fall. As St Paul puts it (in the words of the Easter Anthems):

*Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead:
For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. (Romans 5.19)*

“Because of his measureless love,” writes Irenaeus, “he became what we are, to enable us to become what he is.” Christ, by his identification with humanity at every stage of its existence, by his perfect obedience, restores fellowship with God to the whole human race. The Cross means the inauguration of a new, redeemed humanity, redeemed into Paradise — that is, not merely into a life beyond death, but into a life restored, a life in fellowship with God beginning now.



Adam and Eve may be mythological figures: what these pictures show us, in words and pictures, is human beings, you and me, being pulled by this joyful, vigorous Christ from darkness to life, from death to life, from bondage to freedom:

*Long my imprison'd spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night:
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray: I woke, the dungeon, flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free: I rose, went forth and followed thee.*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you — you who are kept by the power of God through faith for the salvation which is ready to be revealed in the last time.

God bless,
Loveday

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