In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Lent and Easter celebrations, Easter Saturday can take on an eerie silence. Western church traditions typically do not make much of Easter Saturday. It is just the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. However there is a rich tradition that predominantly is now only observed in the Eastern church, of observing the time Jesus spent dead in the tomb, on Holy Saturday. In fact, there is an early Christian tradition that believed that whilst dead, Christ descended to the dead and preached to the spirits there. This belief has died away to a degree, particularly since the reformation due to the paucity of biblical support. However, there is some rich imagery in the belief of Christ’s descent to Hell that can be useful in our Easter reflections.

### HISTORY OF BELIEF IN THE DESCENSUS

The primary biblical source for Christ’s descent to Hell is 1 Peter 3:19-20, 4:6. It says there that Christ went to the dead and preached to the imprisoned spirits. This idea was taken very literally in the early church for the first few centuries [1]. Other scriptures that were taken to be allusions to the descent included Psalm 68:16 “he led captives in his train”; Ephesians 4:7-9 “in order to fill the whole universe”; Philippians 2:9-11 “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth”; Romans 14:8-9 “that he might be the Lord both of the dead and of the living” [2].

In the first three centuries the term used to describe Christ’s descent was “descensus ad inferos”, which meant “descent to lower places” [1]. A change in terminology arose out of Rufinus’ work, he adopted the term “descensus ad inferna” which meant “descent to hell”. This lead to a shift both in terminology, but also more importantly in theology. The earlier use of the word inferos showed the extent of God’s grace, that it went beyond human limitations, even the limit of death. “…Rufinus’s word inferna, ‘hell,’ would start to change the result of the descent from one of God’s presence with the dead to a belief in Christ’s reconciliation of sinners” [1].
CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF THE DESCENSUS

The early church interpreted 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 4:6 as teaching a doctrine of Christ’s literal descent to the dead. In contemporary theology these verses are more commonly understood to be symbolic, communicating the extent of the redemption. This however, “involves a more spiritualised hermeneutic that usually practiced by evangelicals” [3]. Putting aside the issue of a spiritualised hermeneutic, there are a number of exegetical issues in the text that need resolution if this text is to form the basis of a theology that is nowhere else explicitly stated in scripture!

In Greek there are two verbs that are translated as ‘preach’. In 1 Pet 3:19 the verb used is keryssō which can also be translated as ‘proclaim’. The term that is more broadly used to speak of preaching the good news is euangelizomai [4]. So this means that the preaching/proclamation may not have been for the purpose of bringing the spirits in 1 Pet 3:19 to repentance. Some see the verb here to be a proclamation of victory, where Jesus went and just told the spirits what he had accomplished on the cross, thus pronouncing their condemnation. However, there are instances of keryssō being used in the context of gospel proclamation, so this is not entirely conclusive.

Another view that is taken on the preaching, is that the spirit of Christ preached to the unrepentant people of Noah’s generation through Noah’s lips [5]. This view is somewhat problematic, because it does not account for the ‘prison’ reference, and as we will also shortly see, is problematic due to the understanding of the word ‘spirit’.

Just as there are issues with the verb, ‘preach’ there are similar difficulties with those to whom Jesus preached, the spirits (1 Pet 3:19). In the Greek, the term used in this verse is pneuma. Usually this word is not used in an unqualified way to refer to the spirits of people, psyche is the usual word for speaking of the spirits of the dead [4]. It is also worth noting that nowhere in scripture is the place of the dead (Sheol, Hades, Tartarus) described as ‘prison’ [4].

Another interpretation that has been offered is that these pneumata are fallen angels, or the offspring of the angels who slept with human women before the flood [4]. In this context, ‘prison’ is understood to represent “in spatial terms God’s restraining power over [the spirits]” [4].

A further problem exists; many people who support the descensus view connect 1 Pet 3:19 with 1 Pet 4:6. In the English translation the verb “preach” appears, and in both there is a reference to “spirits” or to “the dead” which to English speaking ears sounds connected. As discussed earlier, there are two verbs in Greek for preach, keryssō and euangelizomai. In 1 Pet 3:19, the verb keryssō is used, and in 4:6 euangelizomai is used. Thus the link is not as strong as it appears in the English [4]. To compound this, the words “spirits” (pneumata) 3:19 and “the dead” (nekrois) are not synonymous in Greek [4].

This leaves us with the question of what to do with these verses! Jobes suggests that a more appropriate interpretation can be made by referring to the tradition of Enoch preaching to the imprisoned spirits from the time of Noah [4]. The apocryphal book of 1 Enoch describes a scenario where after Enoch went to be with God, he was talking to the fallen angels who requested that he intercede with God for them, and the children they had had with human women. Enoch does this, and descends to them again with a response from God, “You will have no peace”.

Jobes argues that Peter uses this story, which is well known amongst his readers from Asia Minor, to encourage them of “the sweeping scope of the efficacy of Christ’s victory in his resurrection and ascension...that Christ’s resurrection and ascension have dealt with even the primordial evil of fallen angels in uncountable prior centuries of human history, then Christ is victorious over all evil—even the most depraved—for all time” [4].

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

While we may dismiss the descensus interpretation of 1 Pet 3:19; 4:6 as mythological, as with all myths it teaches us something important. That Christ’s death and resurrection affects “…the whole created world and our stewardship for the earth....the Easter transformation includes the whole world” [6]. The Eastern Orthodox icons that depict Adam and Eve being delivered from the dead by Christ shows vividly “…that the resurrection is not only an individual victory for Christ but also the saving event for all the world” [6]. Von Balthasar puts it eloquently, “Whereas the Western images of Easter always show the risen Christ alone, the East makes us see the soteriological and social aspect of the redemptive work” [7]. Christ’s descent to the dead places an emphasis on the effects of Easter, it is not limited by time or space, “For through Jesus, life enters into the kingdom of death and overcomes its terrible darkness” [8].

One perhaps odd implication is that the dead are no longer “dead” in the way they were before.

If they have been led farth from death in the way described in the descent narrative, then we have community with them as much as with our living Christian brothers and sisters. “In effect, the distance separating the two realms is being shortened and a powerful bond being solidified between the living and the dead” [9].

We speak of the importance of Christ’s incarnation, of the Son of God coming to be one of us. To live as we live, and to redeem us almost by having solidarity with us. It seems though that in a spiritualised understanding of the descent, we lose something of Christ’s solidarity with us, that his shared experience with us was not only in life but also in death. We no longer need fear death, as in Christ’s descent to the dead he “filled[ed] that realm too with the light of his resurrection into eternal life. That with, the night of death becomes the stillness heralding the dawn of the resurrection” [10].

God is present with the dead in Christ, God is present with us through death. This is the ultimate reassurance. Without the descent, we know that He awaits us “on the other side”, but that leaves us with the journey in between [1]. The descent gives voice to the love of God for the dead, in an expressive metaphor [1].

NOTES