

# "He Descended into Hell"

By Archdeacon T. C. Hammond.

There is an interesting historical circumstance connected with the framing of this article. In the 1552 edition of the Articles there is a statement:—"While the body lay in the sepulchre until the resurrection, the spirit sent forth from Him was with the spirits who were detained in prison or in hell, and preached to them, as the place in Peter bears witness."

Apparently Archbishop Parker was willing to accept this pronouncement. At least he did not suggest an alteration in the rough draft submitted by him to convocation. Strype in his "Annals of the Reformation" preserves for us the appeal of Bishop Alley of Exeter, "That the descent of the spirit of Christ into hell may not be made an article of Faith, on account of the violent controversy among the clergy of his diocese upon that subject." Aquinas had already given an interpretation of "the place in Peter" which identified the preaching to the spirits in prison with the pre-incarnate activity of our Lord Jesus Christ who in spirit preached to the disobedient in the time of Noah through Noah's prophetic instrumentality. This ruled out the dogmatic assertion contained in the 1552 article. Calvin had suggested that the words in the Creed could best be explained as implying that our Lord suffered the agonies of Hell on the Cross.

## Varying Interpretations.

These varying judgments caused the Elizabethan divines to hesitate to impose one particular interpretation on a much disputed passage of Scripture. It might be asked why, in view of these varying opinions, did they not elide the article altogether?

We suggest that these were three reasons which operated against such a decision.

In the first place, the words "He descended into Hell" were part of the Apostles' Creed, since the fifth century. The framers of our article were naturally averse to exposing themselves to the criticism that they were removing a time honoured article of faith. In view of the controversies of the day, they were most anxious to assure the world that they adhered to the ancient statement of the Christian faith.

In the second place, while the passage in Peter under review might be susceptible of another interpretation than that which was suggested in the Article of 1552, there remained the explicit statement of Peter in the Acts "His soul was not left in hell." To ignore an explicit scriptural statement and delete all reference to our Lord's

descent into hell would not help the cause of scriptural truth to which the Reformers were committed.

## Survival of Death.

But the third suggested consideration is the most important of all to us. The idea has frequently been mooted that death ends all existence. It has been contended that there is no consciousness of the soul between death and resurrection. But the assertion of the Article, as we now have it, is that our Lord's personality survived the shock of death and penetrated to the unseen world. His words on the Cross:—"Father into Thy hands

## THE 39 ARTICLES.

### 3. Of the going down of Christ into Hell.

As Christ died for us, and was buried, so also is it to be believed that he went down into Hell.

I commend my spirit" found a proper counterpart in the assertion that he went into what the Old Testament calls Sheol and the New Testament Hades.

## Unseen Sphere.

Perhaps the least controversial method of describing it would be "the unseen sphere." That is the literal meaning of the Greek word, and that is also, in the judgment of many, the precise significance of the Hebrew Sheol.

But not only is there the important suggestion of continued existence after the great catastrophe of death, there is a world of comfort in the reflection that the wayfarer who meets this unnerving experience, the dread separation of soul and body, has only to look to the Saviour in his hour of need. In this, as in every other aspect of His earthly life He was tempted just as we are. In the most harassing form the experience which is ours was also His. He knew the passage through the dark valley having entered it Himself. He had all the sense of remoteness from the activities of this life which is such a poignant feature in the Old Testament delineations of Sheol. But He passed through the valley and gained for Himself and for us the blessed experience of a reunited life of soul and body in the full glory of the Divine Presence. Could there be a more accurate realisation of the gracious promise, "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee"? It is no empty formula but a message full of hope and gladness when we say in the Creed, "He descended into hell."