

HARROWING HADES IN HOMILIES

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

One of the most moving sermons on our Saviour's Descent into Hades was delivered by Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus (+403). Some thirty years ago, Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Mass., published the entire sermon in the book, *The Lamentations of Matins of Holy and Great Saturday*. Because of its length, we cannot reproduce the whole sermon here, but we would like to present just two small portions here for the edification of our readers. However, none of you are absolved of the obligation of reading this wonderful homily in its entirety. If you fail to do so, you are only cheating yourselves.

Here, therefore, are the two portions, which we are dangling before your eyes as "teasers", just to lure you into reading the whole thing:

Ye that from ages past have fallen asleep, rejoice! Ye that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, receive the great Light! With the servants is the Master; with the dead is God; with the mortal is Life; with the guilty is the Guiltless; with those in darkness is the unwaning Light; with the captives is the Liberator; and with those in the nethermost is He that is above the very heavens. Christ [came] upon earth, and we have believed; Christ is among the dead, let us descend with Him and behold those mysteries yonder! Let us come to know the wonders of the Hidden One hidden under the earth! Let us learn how and to whom the *kerygma* was manifested in Hades!

What then? Did God save absolutely all when He appeared in Hades? In no wise. But there also He saved them that believed. Yesterday economy, today authority; yesterday the tokens of infirmity, today those of majesty; yesterday the tokens of humanity, today those of Divinity. Yesterday, He was slapped; today He smites the tenement of Hades with the lightning of His Divinity. Yesterday He was bound; today He binds the tyrant with infrangible bonds. Yesterday He was condemned; today He bestows liberty on the condemned. Yesterday Pilate's ministers mocked Him; today Hades' gatekeepers saw Him and trembled.

Towards the end of Saint Epiphanius' Homily, we learn the following:

Adam turned towards all his fellow captives from ages past and said, "I hear the sound of Someone's feet advancing towards us, and if He deigns to come even to this place, we shall be freed of our bonds,

may, if we should but see Him in our midst, we shall be delivered from Hades!" And as Adam said these things and their like to all his fellow prisoners, the Master entered within, holding the Cross as a weapon of victory. Then Adam the first-fashioned beholding Him, beat his breast in exuberance and cried to all, "My Lord be with you all!" And Christ replied and said to Adam, "And with thy spirit," and grasping his hand, He said, "Stand up, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine on thee'. (Eph.5:14) I am thy God, Who for thy sake became thy Son, for thy sake and for thy descendants' sake, and now I say and, with authority, command the shackled, Come forth! and those in darkness, Be enlightened! and those asleep, Arise! I enjoin thee, Awake, O sleeper! for I did not fashion thee to be held in Hades as a captive. Arise from the dead, for I am the Life of the dead! Arise, My creation, arise, Mine image, who wast also made in My likeness! 'Arise, let us go hence!" for thou art in Me and I in thee; we are one indivisible person. For thy sake thy God became thy Son; for thy sake the Master took the image of a slave; for thy sake I Who am above the heavens came down upon earth and even beneath the earth; for thee, who art a man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead ' (Ps. 87:4).

A QUESTION

If our Saviour's Descent into Hades was an event that rescued only the souls that were imprisoned there *only* up until that time, as some say, then why do the Lives of the Saints record accounts about souls that were rescued from Hades *centuries later*?

Certainly, I hope you *are* reading the Lives of the Saints.