

Into the Depths: The Crucifixion, Descent, and Gentle Obedience in Contemporary Australia

Texts: John 18:1–19:42; Luke 6:17–49

Introduction

In the Christian story, the crucifixion of Jesus and the descent into hell represent the most radical forms of divine solidarity with human suffering. John 18–19 details Christ's trial, torment, and death with unflinching clarity. Yet, the gospel narrative does not end at the tomb. The Apostles' Creed affirms, "He descended to the dead." Often overlooked in contemporary theology, this descent proclaims there is no place so forsaken that Christ does not enter it. Paired with Luke's account of the Incarnation and Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49), we are presented with a theology of presence, obedience, and reversal.

In a modern Australian context—shaped by rising secularism, mental health crises, inequality, and increasing spiritual apathy—these biblical themes are not relics but resources. They address our wounds, challenge our complacencies, and guide our transformation into resurrection people.

1. The Crucifixion and the Suffering God

John's account of the crucifixion does not depict a passive victim. Jesus is deliberate and composed, even as he faces betrayal, arrest, and condemnation. When he proclaims, "It is finished" (John 19:30), it is not a cry of defeat but of fulfilled purpose. Here, divine obedience and human suffering converge.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison, "Only a suffering God can help." This statement captures the essence of the cross: God does not merely observe our pain but fully enters it. For Australians impacted by personal trauma, climate-related disasters,

domestic violence, or systemic injustice, this truth remains revolutionary. The cross asserts that God is not absent; God is present.

2. Descent into Hell: Christ in Our Lowest Places

The descent to the dead, traditionally referred to as “into hell,” is not a speculative doctrine but a pastoral promise. It confirms that Jesus has experienced the depths of human abandonment. As 1 Peter 3:19 suggests, Christ even preaches to “the spirits in prison.” The lowest, darkest places of despair are not beyond His reach.

In modern Australia, where suicide remains a leading cause of death among young people, and Indigenous communities face generational trauma, this doctrine speaks volumes. It affirms that Christ is present in prisons, psych wards, addiction clinics, and the bushfire-ravaged outskirts of rural towns. His resurrection does not erase suffering; it redeems it from within.

3. The Incarnation and the Sermon on the Plain

Luke’s gospel clearly shows that Jesus does not float above history. He is born into poverty, raised in obscurity, and ministers to those on the margins. In Luke 6:17-49, Jesus teaches from a level place, not a mountaintop, but amongst the people. The Sermon on the Plain is a manifesto of reversal: the poor are blessed, the rich are warned, enemies are to be loved, and mercy prevails over judgment.

The ethic showcased by Jesus at the cross is evident: selfless love, humility, and adherence to the Father’s will. It reflects not triumphalism but tenderness, not coercion, but compassion. In a society frequently influenced by rugged individualism and success stories, the Sermon on the Plain quietly invites us to consider an alternative path—gentle obedience.

4. Gentle Obedience in a Proud Age

The phrase “gentle obedience” might feel countercultural in modern Australia, where independence and personal autonomy are prized. But gentle obedience is not weakness. It is a robust, resilient posture of trust and surrender. Jesus’ journey to the cross is not marked by force but fidelity.

In Luke 22:42, we see this obedience unfold: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” This prayer is a model for all who wish to walk toward resurrection. It seeks not to escape but transformation.

Today, the Church in Australia is called to exact obedience. This requires listening before speaking, serving before leading, and confessing before judging. It also necessitates relinquishing cultural power to embody spiritual presence. As trust in institutions declines, what will restore the credibility of the Christian witness is not control but Christ-like character.

5. #### Australian Social Trends and Gospel Relevance

Recent studies show that as a community, we increasingly identify as “spiritual but not religious.” It is easy to be sceptical towards organised religion yet profoundly interested in justice, mindfulness, and belonging. The gospel, when lived authentically, addresses each of these longings.

The crucifixion and descent affirm that Christianity is not a religion of escape but of engagement. It speaks into the broken places of our culture:

- • Mental health: Jesus bears the world's anguish and descends to the depths, making the struggle sacred.
- Economic disparity: The Sermon on the Plain uplifts the poor and critiques the comfortable, encouraging equity.
- Reconciliation with First Nations peoples: The Church must embody the humility and repentance exemplified in Jesus to walk the path of truth-telling and justice.
- Climate anxiety: The resurrection affirms that new life is possible, but our obedience must include stewardship.

6. Resurrection People: Living Between the Cross and the Empty Tomb

To be people of the resurrection is to live in the tension of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It means walking through the valley before reaching the mountaintop. Resurrection is not merely a future hope but a present power transforming our lives.

We live as resurrection people when we:

- Kneel at the feet of the hurting like Jesus at the Last Supper.
- Endure hardship without bitterness, trusting in the God who brings life from death.
- Speak words of life into despair, practising small acts of radical love.

Conclusion: A Call to the Australian Church

We are invited to see our story within God's larger story as Holy Week unfolds. The crucifixion and the descent into hell remind us that no depth is beyond God's reach. The Sermon on the Plain reminds us that the values of God's kingdom overturn the world's standards.

We are not called to loud triumph but to faithful presence, not to cultural dominance but to Christlike service. In a time when Australia is searching for meaning, may the Church respond with humility, gentle obedience, and deep resurrection hope. Christ has gone to the depths and risen—not just for us, but with us.

For many, today is a sad, difficult day. It is a day on which the depths are fully seen, yet into those depths is the presence of Christ. Today, our journey takes us into the Sabbath, the rest day of the Lord. We will look forward to the dawn of the new day, the glorious day, when all of this makes sense. We will return proclaiming the Risen Presence of Christ, scarred but alive. He will greet us in peace and begin reconciling his people to himself.

So today, we pause. As the psalmist puts it, we see that at times, we are drowning in the depths of despair, but we are given the promise of the descent to the depths that Christ has not abandoned us. He asks us to take up our cross daily, gird ourselves with a towel, and take the light that no darkness could extinguish into the world he loves.

May God give us courage to do just that in our lives, and in all that we do and say in Jesus' name, whose body we are.

Sources

- The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. SCM Press.
- Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*. Eerdmans, 2015.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, 2022.

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- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia.
- ABC Religion & Ethics, various reports on faith trends and reconciliation efforts.

The crucifixion and descent into hell demonstrate God's solidarity with human suffering, affirming God's presence in all places. This theology, paired with the Incarnation and Sermon on the Plain, offers a message of presence, obedience, and reversal. In contemporary Australia, these themes address wounds, challenge complacency, and guide transformation towards resurrection hope.

- Theological Significance of Jesus' Descent: Jesus' descent into hell, often overlooked, signifies God's presence even in the most forsaken places.
- Relevance of Biblical Themes in Modern Australia: Themes of crucifixion, descent, and obedience offer resources to address contemporary issues like secularism, mental health, and inequality.
- Jesus' Crucifixion as a Model of Obedience: Jesus' crucifixion demonstrates divine obedience even in the face of suffering, highlighting the convergence of divine and human experiences.
- God's Presence in Suffering: God fully enters human pain and suffering, offering comfort and hope to those impacted by trauma, disasters, and injustice.
- Christ's Presence in Despair: Jesus' descent into hell affirms God's presence in the darkest places of despair, offering redemption and hope to those facing suicide, trauma, and hardship.
- Jesus' Example of Humility: Jesus' life and teachings, particularly the Sermon on the Plain, emphasise selfless love, humility, and obedience as an alternative to societal norms of individualism and success.
- Gentle Obedience: A robust and resilient posture of trust and surrender, exemplified by Jesus' journey to the cross.
- Exact Obedience for the Church: Listening, serving, confessing, and relinquishing cultural power to embody spiritual presence.
- Addressing Cultural Longings: The gospel, lived authentically, speaks to Australians' desire for justice, mindfulness, and belonging.
- Resurrection Living: Living in the tension of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, enduring hardship with hope, and practising radical love.
- Christlike Service: Responding to Australia's search for meaning with humility, obedience, and resurrection hope.
- God's Presence: Recognising God's reach in all depths and the transformative power of resurrection.
- Theology of Suffering: God's presence in human suffering, demonstrated through the crucifixion and descent into hell.
- Message of Christianity: Presence, obedience, and reversal, as seen in the Incarnation and Sermon on the Plain.
- Application in Australia: Addressing wounds, challenging complacency, and guiding transformation towards resurrection hope.