

Descent into Hell

By A.M. Allchin

I

The bringing up of Joakim Skovgaard's great picture *Kristus i de dødes Rige*, from the nether regions of the Statens Museum for Kunst, and its restoration to public view has been in itself a sort of resurrection. Certainly for me the possibility of seeing this picture directly, and the chance of seeing it at leisure, and in the context of other European paintings of the same period and of somewhat similar inspiration was of the greatest value. The invitation to take part in the public discussion and study of its meaning and character was something which I greatly appreciated, and for which I was deeply grateful.

The subject of the picture is described sometimes as *Christ in the Kingdom of death*, and sometimes, as by Holger Begtrup, as *Christ's Descent to the Kingdom of Death*. Surely both titles would have been acceptable to Skovgaard himself and both I suppose would have been acceptable to Grundtvig, had he *per impossible* been able to view it. But the reality, the mystery, the event, if we may call it that, which the canvas depicts, is in fact what much of the Christianity of the first millennium and I think all the Christianity of the Orthodox East still today would call simply the Resurrection. If you go to the central church of the old Christian world, you find it in Jerusalem. We call it in our western languages the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, because it centres on the little edifice which covers what is believed to be the site of the empty tomb. But in Greek and in the languages of the Christian East it is called simply the church of the Resurrection, for that is what the empty tomb signifies.

Again, if you attend the Easter Vigil service of any Orthodox church today, you will find the service is punctuated time and time again by a short three-lined verse. »Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling down death, to those in the tombs giving life.« It is important to notice that the first line contains the substance of the verse, its direct and original affirmation; the two subsequent lines with their present participles comment on its meaning. The resurrection is through death and over death, it means new life for all in the tombs. Indeed in the faith of the first millennium, both of East and West, the cross and resurrection touch not only the whole human family, but the whole creation. As the

old latin hymns for Holy Week declare, earth and sea and sky and all things are cleansed and renewed by the blood of the cross. A ninth century Irish text, possibly a kind of extended homily for the Easter Vigil, speaks of Christ's bodily resurrection as implying the resurrection of all human bodies and indeed of the whole creation, since all the elements of the creation were present in the body in which Christ arose. Only in that way could all creation escape destruction in the fire of divine judgement.

It is this universal event, the coming of life to all humanity, and implicitly to all creation, which Skovgaard's painting depicts. In this way, although its style and visual form have nothing in common with the traditional Eastern depiction of the resurrection, its content is, I believe, identical. Nor is this surprising, because the direct inspiration for the picture came from Grundtvig's own reworking of the Anglo-Saxon poem on the subject which represents that same first millennium faith. As we know Grundtvig's hymn on the theme of the descent into hell, was particularly dear to Skovgaard's mother just as it was to Jakob Knudsen's mother. In a remarkable way Grundtvig had made available to Danish parents in the middle of the nineteenth century an understanding and experience of the resurrection of Christ as involving the destruction of the kingdom and power of death and the universal giving of life anew.

As I have already said Skovgaard's way of depicting Christ's presence in the place of the dead, is very different from that of the typical Eastern Christian icon of the scene, or indeed of the typical Romanesque western depiction of it. In both these traditional ways of depicting the mystery the picture is dynamic and animated. In the Orthodox icon the figure is that of Christus Victor; Christ the conqueror is trampling on the prison gates of death and on the symbols of human enslavement, the chains, the bars, the manacles, and drawing up from the dead, our first parents, Adam and Eve, into the light of life. In what is perhaps the greatest of all the representations of this scene in Eastern iconography, the magnificent fresco in the apse of the side-chapel of the Church of our Saviour in Chora in Constantinople, the Christ figure strides across the apse pulling up our first parents with a gesture of extraordinary power and energy.

The Western version of the same scene, as one finds it particularly in manuscript illuminations of the tenth and eleventh century, is different. Here a very tall Christ figure seen from the side, bends down

low with a gesture of compassionate concern, and draws up the tiny figures of Adam and Eve and the other dead from the jaws of a great monster, the monster of death. The form is different, and the movement less triumphant more condescending, in the good sense of that word, but in its own way it is no less impressive.

By contrast the Skovgaard depiction of the event looks at first sight distinctly static. The Christ figure seems to tower over the picture on the right hand side, majestic but almost aloof; the arms are held out in a gesture which suggests the extension of the arms on the cross, but also seems in some way distant. That at least was my impression of the picture in all the black and white reproductions which I had seen. Here was the first great discovery in actually meeting the painting itself. As soon as I saw the picture I saw that my first impression had been altogether mistaken. The Christ figure is not at all static; there is a gentle but unmistakable movement as well as majesty in the figure. The risen Christ advances into the space in the middle of the picture. The gesture of the arms is wide and all-embracing and it is more clearly welcoming, even beckoning, than reproductions had suggested. The risen Lord is not only present among the dead, he is coming to them gently but decisively. And his gaze is fixed not on the figures of Eve and Adam who rise up in supplication to greet him, but beyond them on the host of the dead who line the left hand side of the picture. It is a gaze of active compassion.

It is often said of the Orthodox icon, and indeed it has been said of the Skovgaard picture, that it is unbiblical. It depicts an incident, an event which is nowhere described in the New Testament. That is in a sense true. But it is an image at least indirectly based on what the New Testament tells us about Christ going to preach to the souls in prison, still more based on the insistent teaching of St Paul that as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. It is certainly more biblical than the familiar western picture of the resurrection, as we know it both in medieval and in renaissance art, a picture of a solitary figure stepping out of a tomb, carrying a banner. This is an image which in failing to suggest the solidarity of Christ with his fellow men and women, is theologically disastrous. It is striking moreover that the New Testament nowhere describes directly the movement of the resurrection. It tells us about the earthquake, about the stone being rolled away, about the empty tomb, about the vision of angels; it remains silent about the innermost event which these other events accompany. The Orthodox

iconographic tradition does have a convention for depicting the garden of the resurrection, and in accordance with the biblical sobriety and seriousness of that tradition it shows us the things which the Gospel texts speak about, an empty tomb, angels seated on either side of it, the women coming with their spices to anoint the body of the crucified Lord. But it carefully does not show us the moment of the resurrection itself. About that it is as silent as the New Testament narrative.

II

How was it that in late nineteenth century Denmark we should find such a powerful, eloquent and disturbing depiction of this mystery of the resurrection, so deeply one, not in its form but in its content, with the way in which the resurrection was depicted in the Christianity of the first millennium, and continues to be represented in the Eastern Orthodox tradition to this day? To answer that question we need to turn back and consider a little more of the relation of the Skovgaard family to N.F.S. Grundtvig, and the characteristic features of Grundtvig's own understanding of the heart of the Christian message.

If we turn to 1836, the year of the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation settlement in Denmark, a time when the young P.C. Skovgaard was just beginning to be known as a painter in Copenhagen, we find the future Bishop Martensen bringing a distinguished German visitor, Professor P.K. Marheineke to visit Grundtvig. The German scholar led the conversation round towards the theology of Hegel, and asked Grundtvig what he thought of Hegel's use of dialectical method in his theological work. Grundtvig, to the surprise of his visitor, replied that he was afraid of speculative theology. »*Mein Gegensatz ist Leben und Tod*«. »For me the contradiction is between life and death«.¹

This is one of the stories about Grundtvig which remains currently known; it so evidently sums up a basic truth about him. His theology is not abstract and theoretical, it is lived and existential. And however important the conflict between good and evil, between sin and forgiveness may be in his teaching, his thinking constantly comes back to the deeper and more all-inclusive conflict, the conflict between life and death. For Grundtvig the victory of Christ is essentially the victory over death itself. Faith in the descent into hell, in the destruction of death by death has for him the absolute centrality that it had in the first Christian

millennium. We can see here something of Grundtvig's preference for the theology of the first Christian centuries, which Martensen remarks on with surprise in his account of his early theological conversations with Grundtvig.²

This emphasis is on the centrality of the struggle between life and death had many consequences for Grundtvig's presentation of the Christian message. It allowed him, for instance, to take large elements both of Greek and Norse mythology as a kind of second, auxiliary, *preparatio evangelica*. It enabled him to point to ways in which the redeeming work of Christ may be understood as working backwards in time as well as forwards, so that it can allow for the salvation of those who lived long before the Gospel was preached, and those who have never heard it. For some in nineteenth century Christendom such a wideness of interpretation of Christ's work of salvation aroused anxiety and indeed hostility. It seemed to be making salvation too easy, to be suggesting that there might be some kind of second chance after death. For others it was a lifegiving insight which made the Christian faith again a living possibility.

One such sceptical but grateful believer was Frederik Barfod who tells us how he found Grundtvig's teaching very encouraging. He says that he was greatly struck by the hymn about the descent into hell. »The thought that all those dear people I had known, both from history and from life, should be damned forever because they had not learned to know and accept the faith, here below in the brief space of this life, outraged my feelings as a flagrant injustice ... Now I saw that there was another possibility and I was glad, I can certainly say I was glad, both for their sake and for Our Lord's.«³

There was another and further advantage in the use of the *Christus Victor* story with its vivid dramatic character, to convey the central elements of the Christian message. Grundtvig, in his sermons, is constantly critical of much classical Lutheran preaching because of its drily doctrinal and over-intellectual quality. He deplors its lack of imagination and human warmth, its lack of attraction as he puts it »for women and young people«. His own theology as expressed in his hymns even more than in his sermons succeeded in speaking precisely to mothers of families and to their children in a quite remarkable way. We have Skovgaard's own brief but precious notation from 1933, that the hymn on the descent into hell was one of his mother's favourite hymns, and that it had been familiar to him from his childhood. We have another re-

markable account of the effects of a mother singing that same hymn to her children in one of Jakob Knudsen's essays. Here, as with the Skovgaard parents we have a family in which Grundtvig's influence was close and personal, a family in which his ideas were being seriously studied and practiced. Knudsen's mother was troubled about how to speak to her small children of Christ's death and suffering. She did it by way of the hymn about the descent into hell. »She sang«, Knudsen writes, »about Jesus' triumphant journey from Good Friday evening until Easter morning, and we could see that this was a victory such as none of the old Norse heroes had ever won ... This was something much greater than anything about Thor or the other gods. And then it was *real*. Mother did not say anything special about that but we could see it in her.«⁴

Was it perhaps the same thing which happened in the Skovgaard family? We may well think so. Certainly it means that there were at least some children in Western Christendom in the nineteenth century who were being introduced to the central elements of the Christian story by means of a vivid account of the descent into hell, of Christ's conquest over death in the place of death.

Thus we see the direct influence of Anglo-Saxon poetry in the picture we are considering. One cannot say that Grundtvig's hymn on the descent into hell was a direct translation from the tenth century Anglo-Saxon poem called *Christ and Satan*. It is however clearly inspired by a central passage in that poem and here again we see Grundtvig's love for the theology of first millennium Christianity. As Sid Bradley has been showing in his recent studies of Grundtvig's use of Anglo-Saxon poetry in his own writing, Grundtvig's lifelong fascination with the literature of pre-Norman England was not only literary and historical, it was profoundly theological. And in the theological poetry of this period we can find a vernacular literature both in Anglo-Saxon England and, though I think Grundtvig may not have been aware of this, in Celtic Wales and Ireland, which forms a kind of western branch of the common patristic tradition of the first millennium Greek and Latin world. Already a century and a half ago Grundtvig was vividly aware of the Anglo-Saxon element in this and, as Bradley has shown, was deeply influenced by it.⁵

As has already been said Grundtvig's twenty verse hymn in the first volume of the *Sang Værk* is not a direct translation from the Anglo-Saxon. Nonetheless it contains some of the distinctive images and ideas

of the original text. One particular image which is common to Grundtvig and the original is the central place given to Eve. It is she who in the Anglo-Saxon speaks to Christ, and not Adam, she who confesses that it was her fault in taking the apple which brought about the Fall, it is she who asks that they may be allowed to rise from hell with all their family in Christ's resurrection. In the original »she reaches out her hands to the King of Heaven, and prays to the ordaining Lord for mercy, through the person of Mary«. Grundtvig does not mention Mary's name but he also makes Eve pray to the Saviour as one who has been born of a woman, the seed promised already in the story of Eden.⁶

As we stand back and look at Skovgaard's gigantic painting, we are struck by the contrast between the right hand side, with its majestic figure of Christ, and the streams of light which pour in from behind and the darkness and gloom of the left hand side of the painting with its row upon row of the faces of the dead, like a kind of ghostly audience in a darkened theatre. There is no part of the picture which is more distinctively nineteenth century than this depiction of the dead, in all their multiplicity and anonymity. Holger Begtrup speaks about this powerfully in an essay published in the 1920s when he tells of his own first impression of the picture, »It was not Christ in his heroic stance, nor Eve in her humility, who first caught my attention, no, it was the dead as they appear in row upon row, layer upon layer, which with the help of the gigantic canvas really give the impression of the numberless thousands, who have lived generation after generation only to sink into the earth powerless spectres. All these shadowy forms and faces, wherein one can scarcely distinguish young from old, men from women, but which all bear the same sorrowful stamp of grey uniformity, and which speak so fearfully and truly of what we humans are in ourselves; a clay without life or colour, of which we are made, and to which we return, without any other sign of eternity than the longing for it which is so powerfully portrayed in the outstretched arms and the opened mouths of Skovgaard's picture«.⁷

Out of the darkness of this left hand side of the picture there emerge two figures, a shadowy Adam, and before him an all too solid Eve, and it is Eve who holds the centre of the picture, as it were mediating between darkness and light.

Knowing the central place which Grundtvig gives to woman, Eve, Mary, in the whole history of the human race, the position of Eve in the picture in itself need not surprise us. She is, in the biblical narratives

called by Adam the mother of all living. In a sermon preached in the last years of his life, Grundtvig says »Adam called his wife's name Eve, i.e. Life, since she became the bodily mother of all living, and our forefather evidently called his wife by her right name, for despite all the disturbance which sin has caused in the original order of human nature, it was in a daughter of Eve, the Virgin Mary, that God's only begotten Son sought and found earthly human life, when he humbled himself to bear the image of the earthly so that we could be raised to bear the image of the heavenly«. It is through Eve and then through Mary that salvation comes into the world, resurrection comes to those who lie in the shadow of death.⁸

In an even later sermon Grundtvig suggests that in the human heart something of paradise has always remained, throughout all the tragedies and sins of human history. »Although fallen humankind was chased out of paradise, so that they should not eat of the tree of life and live forever, yet there remained a way of escape, so that the tree of life could spiritually blossom and bear fruit on earth, for the benefit of humankind, because a handful of paradise earth was preserved in the heart of humanity wherein the tree of life could put down its roots and blossom«. And what is more, »When the tree of life was, as it seemed, hopelessly lost, the garden of God was not altogether forgotten, but here and there the rose of paradise grew up wild, betraying through its sweet scent the motherly soil from which it grew«.⁹

We have here in Grundtvig's sermons a conjunction of images, Eve, Mary, the good earth of the heart, the motherly soil of paradise, which speak to us not only of woman's role throughout history, though that is primary, but also of the role of all humanity, for in Grundtvig's thought all of us, men as well as women are called to have, in Grundtvig's words, »a heart in common with the Virgin Mary«, and thus in some way to become Mary. What we have here in the picture is, I believe, an image which takes up the words of Adam in the book of Genesis, Eve is the mother of all living, but she brings forth her children with pain. Does not the figure of Eve suggest the resilience, the courage, the strength, the beauty of human beings, women and men, in face of the constant threats of darkness and death which meet them in their human existence? This is, it seems to me, at least in part, the meaning of the striking figure which holds the centre of the picture which Skovgaard has painted.

III

I could not help thinking on my visit to Copenhagen how wise and far-sighted the organisers of the exhibition had been in putting this Skovgaard picture into the context of a mixed collection of symbolist paintings of the same period at the end of the nineteenth century, a fascinating collection containing some very fine works of art, paintings which simply as paintings are perhaps as successful or indeed more successful and satisfactory than *Christ in the Kingdom of Death* itself. But I could not help also reflecting that Skovgaard's painting is on an altogether different scale. Physically because it is so much larger, but also in a deeper sense because it is so much more all-inclusive.

The other paintings are perhaps all deeply personal in the sense that they convey an individual vision, the artist's own vision of some aspect of the conflict between life and death and sometimes of the possibility that life may triumph. Skovgaard's picture also carries a personal vision; a vision which he has altogether made his own. But it is not at all his own vision in any limitingly individual sense. Rather it is a shared vision, the representation of a corporate experience of two millennia, an attempt at the end of the nineteenth century to express a mystery which has lain at the very heart of Christianity, East and West, from the beginning until today. Skovgaard's is a picture which speaks on behalf of a whole tradition, it is an ecumenical statement, which, whatever its limitations from a purely aesthetic point of view, carries with it for that reason a great weight of significance. As Jakob Knudsen says of his mother singing Grundtvig's hymns about the descent into hell to her children, »*This was real*. Mother did not say anything special about that but one could see it in her«. This I feel is also true of this strange, disturbing, powerful but very moving picture.

Notes

1. *Grundtvigs Erindringer og Erindringer om Grundtvig*, Udg. S. Johansen & H. Høirup, (København, 1948), pp. 180-81.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-84.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.
4. Jakob Knudsen, *Idé og Erindringer*, (København, 1949), p. 188.
5. See for instance S.A.J. Bradley, »Stridige Stykker snildt jeg forbandt: Grundtvig's creative synthesis of Anglo-Saxon sources«. *Grundtvig Studier*, 1996.

6. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry. An Anthology of Old English Poems in Prose Translation With Introduction and Headnotes*, S.A.J. Bradley, (London, 1982), p. 97.
7. Holger Begtrup, *Folkelige Foredrag*, (København, 1926), p. 128.
8. *Grundtvig's Sidste Prædikener*, Volume I, p. 431.
9. *Ibid.*, Volume II, pp. 85-6.

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