ADVENT SHOFAR

BUT ARE YOU READY?

in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at [the sound of] the last trumpet call. For a trumpet will sound, and the dead [who believed in Christ] will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed wondrously transformed.

And the Trumpet *will* sound…

St Paul, in his first letter to the Church in Corinth sets out for us suddenness of the End when it comes (**15:52**). It is the same kind of warning issued by Jesus himself. It will be such a surprise that people will be working in the garden, resting in the house, travelling along the road and suddenly the Son of Man appears and judgment has come. It will come like a thief in the night, at an hour that you do not expect. And then it will be all over. This is why, in numerous parables he warns his followers to *be alert,* to ensure there is enough oil in our lamps for the Master, the Bridegroom, the Son of Man will return out of the blue. Are we ready? Ignoring this does not mean it is not going to happen.

No ambiguity about the teachings of Jesus:

There is a story in **Luke 13:1-19** where some people told Jesus about the *Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices*. It was a brutal massacre by the Roman Governor, but its importance is to be found in the response of Jesus. He did not lament or comment on this tragedy. Nor did he seek to condemn the Romans for the violence. What he did was use this moment to emphasise the most important human reality—the issue of personal salvation. *But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.* Rather than focus on the unjust murder of these people, He invites His listeners to use the event to focus on what happens to their immortal souls after death. However we might like to deal with scripture, its message is clear… they are dogmas of faith clearly revealed in the sacred Scriptures… As it is written, *Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire* (**Matthew 25:41**) and again *the smoke of their torments shall ascend for ever and ever* (**Apocalypse 16:11**) and again *they shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction* (**II Thessalonians 1:9**).

For us to pay due attention to the salvation of our souls amidst all the concerns of our daily lives, we must keep in our minds and hearts what are traditionally called **the Four Last Things, i.e. Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell**. These are the most certain and unavoidable realities, truths we tend to ignore today but which hold the key to our fidelity as disciples of Jesus Christ here on earth.

But Hell is not a pleasant topic. It is an ugly, unsettling, dangerous reality—expedient to dismiss, easy to avoid serious discussion about, convenient to disregard by joking about in a way that trivializes it. But it is not going to disappear and we have to deal with it.

The sobering certainty about Hell is this: One day every person who has ever lived will stand in judgment for their conduct in this life. For some that will not go well because they turned their backs on God and submitted to other “gods”. Hell will be their sentence.

[Christ] is appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead (Acts)

At the moment of death, our earthly life ceases, and our immortal soul leaves the body. At that moment there is no more time for repentance from sins or reconciliation with God and others. We can no longer pray, perform good works, receive the sacraments, grow in holiness and or union with God.

At the moment of our particular judgment (which happens right after death), we will stand before God, one-on-one, and give a complete account of all the gifts and blessings that we have received from Him and how we have made use of them in our lives. *We will give account for* every single second of our lives and every grace we have received from God. *We will account for* God’s gifts of truth and love poured into our hearts and the relationships that we have had with others. *We will account for our* every thought, word, and deed…*I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter* (**Mt. 12:36**).

Based on the outcome of this judgment, we will either enter the perfect life of complete happiness with God and the saints in heaven, or we will enter into the eternal punishment and separation from God in hell.

Where will we spend eternity after death—heaven or hell?

This is a most important question for all Christians. However, it appears that other issues seem to be prioritized in our Church today. There seems to be more emphasis on mutual listening, gender, treaties, inclusivity, tolerance, climate change, immigration... We seem to have ignored the fact that the Church (us) is first and foremost the living witness to the ongoing saving works of the Risen Christ in the world. This means that, while experiencing for themselves the fruits of salvation won by Jesus Christ, the Church labours for the salvation of all humanity through her prayers, witnessing, evangelizing, charitable works and suffering. And in all of this we need to remind ourselves of our final judgment.

We must not be so naïve as to ignore the **Four Last Things**—as if they will go away if we do not think about them. Whoever we are, death will come our way, accompanied by the other three realities. Every day, every choice brings us closer to them.

God fulfilled His promise to come down and save His people in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself tasted death for us on the cross so that we too can face death and judgment with a good conscience and trust in God as our loving Father. God is a God of love, a just judge, a loving Father who wants us all to join with Him in eternal life in Heaven, but in the end, the choice is ours…*In and through Jesus Christ, we are destined for eternal life in heaven—and not for hell, For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with Him* (**1 Thes. 3:9-10**).

Let us meditate on our personal salvation, particularly in this time of Advent, so that we pray, sacrifice, and labour for it without ceasing. When we face death, let it be with trust in God and a good conscience, so that we may bear our personal judgment well, avoid hell, and enter heavenly glory with God forever and ever.

But what are they? What are those four last things?

The four last things deal with our transition from our earthly life to our eternal life. **They are Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell**. Jesus had a lot to say about life after death and about what happens, especially in Matthew 25... *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people on from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.* That Judgment prophesy reminds us that the sheep will be gathered into heaven and as for the goats … *Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*. This is something not to be taken lightly!

The first thing, Death.

We shall all be faced with our own death. We might not die today, but then again, we could. We might well live another fifty years. Because we do not know the timing, we should be prepared. We should live every minute as though it were our last, live every minute obedient to the Lord. And when death comes to us, we accept it with a demeanour of dignity. Bodily death does not mean the end of us. While our bodies may die, our soul live on, for our souls are eternal.

The second thing, Judgement.

There is no reason for us to fear death, for if we have lived a good life, that is, one in accordance with the commandments of God, then when we die, we will face Judgement, and our judgement will be an eternity in the abundant blessings of God. In our judgement, we await these words: "Well done, good and faithful servant,".

When we die, judgement immediately follows, the "Particular" judgement in which we will find ourselves face to face with our lord Jesus Christ. However we relate to Jesus throughout our lives, the role He the Father has given to him after we die will be that of our judge. Our soul will stand in the awe-inspiring Presence of the Holy Son of God, to give an account of every thought, of our every word, and of our every act. We will even answer to Him for what we failed to do – our omissions. He will separate us, the goats from the sheep. We will find ourselves either inheriting the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world -- or accursed and commanded into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. We will be rewarded with Heaven or condemned to Hell.

The third thing, Heaven.

In Heaven, we will come Face to Face with God. We will live in a communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed. We will be perfectly absorbed into Christ, rejoicing in the life of his heavenly glorification. In

the glory of heaven, the *blessed* continue joyfully to fulfill God's will in relation to other men and to all creation. The blessed shall reign with Christ: with him *they shall reign for ever and ever*.

The fourth thing, Hell

Here is an oft ignored Biblical Truth, one that many deny or rationalise away: We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we choose to sin gravely against him, against our neighbour or against ourselves: He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. To die in serious sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever - by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God is called "hell."

Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of serious sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is the eternal separation from God, in whom alone men and women can possess the life and happiness for which he was created.

If we live a life which has turned its back on God, at our death, we will be granted that separation which we pursued throughout our lives. God is seen everywhere in our life, but if we consciously decide to deny him, freely choose other priorities of our own making, then why should we think our deaths would be different? Those condemned to this eternal suffering that the Bible calls Hell…*Don't fear those who kill the body," Jesus said, "rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell* (Matt 10:28; see also 5:29-30; 23:15,33; Luke 10:15; 16:23)..

Be alert! Be prepared! Strive to live in the Love of God

Knowing all this, we can prepare ourselves for these four last things. St Paul, in his usual pity way, urges us to *put to death those parts of us that are the things valued by this earthly life: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry. Stop lying to one another, since we have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator. Christ is all and, in all things, or he is nothing to us.*

We should begin Advent understanding that we will all die. Does it not make sense to commit ourselves to a life that means we will stop at number three - heaven? We will die, will be judged and will enter eternity. In Jesus Christ, that is the will of God, and heaven is ours as long as we strive for righteousness and live in Christ (**Matthew 5,6,7**).

Let us hear now the voice of the Lord. *Let not our hearts* be hardened. *Let us fill our days* with kindness. *Let us seek* to be rich, not in treasure for ourselves, but in the things that matter to God. We know what those are from the Gospels. And when our time comes, let us die in God's grace and friendship and let us be perfectly purified to live forever with Christ…*your adversary the devil, is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*