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…

I have had quite a week, with events coming to a head forming a perfect introduction to the season of Advent. As many of you know, I am undergoing daily treatment to keep a bowel cancer under control and there really is nothing quite like the "C" word to encourage a person to ponder the **Four Last Things** – Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. Somehow, the diagnosis alone makes the inevitable appear much closer that it probably is. Then, last week I went to my GP for an examination of a lump on my breast. While I was there for that consultation, he looked at dark mole on the side of my head and decided it was a melanoma. He removed it immediately and sent it off for a pathology assessment. The results of those things will all be revealed on Friday. Just in time for the season of Advent.

Of course, we do not need to run foul of the dreaded "C" word to come face to face with death. According to statistics, Approximately 150,000 people die every day worldwide. This figure is derived from estimates of roughly 56 million deaths per year, which breaks down to about 153,000 deaths per day, 6,390 per hour, 107 per minute, and 1.78 per second. Death is inevitable unless the Lord returns today.

For Christians, however, death is not what defines life. Nor does death end life. The most that happens is that death merely transforms life. We can proclaim this with great certainty and joy because the incarnate Son of God took on our humanity, died and rose from the grave to set us free. St Paul puts it beautifully: *when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (**1 Cor. 15:54-57**).

The four last things

As Christians, it is because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we can embrace death filled with hope. As the prayer from the ancient funeral liturgy proclaims, *in death, life is changed not ended.* The Gospel of John tells us how, before he died, Jesus told his followers: *I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*. This spells out clearly for us the will of God, the End for which we were all created. These texts remind us of the realities that are central to the season of Advent. We are

all going to die, leave behind our mortal bodies at a time and place which is designated by God, unknown to us. To anyone.

The Church has long preached the Good News of Jesus Christ, a revelation that calls upon every man and woman to Repent, to transform their lives according to the witness and teachings of the same Jesus who is the Christ of God.

Advent runs for four weeks, a period leading up to the birth of our Saviour at Christmas. It is not *about* Christmas though it does end with the *meaning* of Christmas, why God sent his only Son to become a man, one like us, fully human and fully divine. He took on our humanity, including the reality of death, and smashed its power over us. Now, as we ponder that reality, we can prepare ourselves with hope, hope and not fear. Where Jesus has gone, we too can follow. He rose from the grave and invites us to join with him in the same resurrection.

Jesus declared: whoever believes in me even though he dies yet shall he live.

This rising to a new life of eternal peace and joy beyond the grave is not automatic. God has set out for us a way of life that leads to this new life. We are *invited* to join with our brothers and sisters in gathering around the heavenly throne of God, rejoicing in his abundant, enduring love. We cannot do anything to earn this gift of eternal life. It is a free, unearned gift, one in which we share through the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, it is only by living the life spelled out for us by Jesus, in his words and in the witness of his life, that God welcomes us into his eternal home.

For this reason, the opening and enduring message of Jesus is Repent. Turn away from a lifestyle into which sin and godlessness have found a foothold. If the will of God is not at the heart of our lives, not shaping and flavouring all we do, think and say, then what right do we have to expect an eternal life in heaven? It is God's to give, and he pours it out on those who follow the Way of the Son, on those who do not reject him.

And then there is Hell

Repentance and conversion will keep one from Hell but not from the grave. The bodies of all men and women will return to the dust. Hell is not the grave. The body of the rich man in Luke 16 was dead, and that man's soul was in Gehenna. ***Gehenna*** refers to the valley of Hinnom, "a valley near Jerusalem … where children were sacrificed by fire in connection with pagan rites. Later garbage and dead bodies were disposed of and burned in this valley. Gehenna represents the "lake of fire" described in **Revelation 19:20**, the unquenchable fire (**Mark 9:43**) that will destroy the unrepentant (**Matthew 10:28**). This explains why the Bible uses the image of fire. Gehenna, with all of its disgusting, wicked, godless and evil realities represent everything that is far from God. It perfectly describes hell, whether or not the literal hell has literal fires. The image itself tells us all we need to know – it is not a place anyone would choose to live eternally, but some do. They choose a way of life opposite to that expected by God. Advent is our reminder that we need to be alert, always ready to stand before our Heavenly judge. Our future into eternity rests on our ability to align ourselves with Jesus, to allow the Spirit to guide us, our willingness to love and obey.