

## **Advent Theme: Death**

On the four Fridays in Advent I thought it might be good to consider the traditional themes of Advent, the Four Last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell. They may be challenging for us today but they do all have a relevance to peace and reconciliation. And so we begin this week with death.

Death is both a great taboo and yet at the same time something to which we are subjected to constantly on our television screens: both as fact in the news, and in fiction in dramas and films. It is as if we can cope with death if it is at a great distance but not when it affects us personally.

Death is of course the one certainty in life. We will all die at some point. But there are different ways in which we may die. I imagine most of us would wish to die peacefully in our sleep, having made all the necessary preparations. Death by natural causes is the official phrase used when people die from illness or just old age. Yet people die instead as a result of accidents or natural disasters, which may or may not be preventable.

Arguably most horrific are those deaths as a result of violent acts of others. This is particularly distressing when people are killed not out of personal motives but simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The dreadful scenes of carnage in Aleppo are just one extreme instance of that. But sadly there are many more such examples in our world today. Innocent men, women and children are losing their lives every day as a result of the greed, blindness, fanaticism and power-seeking of violent men – and it is so often men who commit such atrocities. We thought we had seen the end of genocide with the close of the Second World War, but that was not to be.

Work for peace and reconciliation has as two of its main aims the prevention of unnecessary and violent death and the means for coping with such death when it does occur. For it is not simply those who are killed who suffer but equally those who survive, those who are left behind.

For Christians death is not the end, though, as the passage we just heard from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth so eloquently proclaims (1 Corinthians 15.51-57). Death may be painful. It may cause us fear and anxiety. Yet there is hope of something better to come: new life, new life in the presence of God. This is the victory our Lord Jesus Christ has already won for us through his death on the cross and his rising again.

This may be good for Christians, for those who believe. But what about those who have no faith or have a different faith? That is a matter for God, not for us. We believe that to God all human lives are precious. We are all his children, whether we acknowledge that or not. We trust in the love and mercy of God. That is our hope in this season of Advent, a season of hope.

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