June 2009

To our neighbours near the church in Friston village and our neighbours near where we individually live.

Dear neighbours,

Mostly this letter is read privately and so it is with confidentiality that I write to you today.

Death is not spoken of in polite conversation, but all of us wonder about it and sometimes wish we could talk about it or get help. As teenagers my pastor was always emphasising that the best time to think about the issues of death is before death looms large. But, of course, there is no time like the present at whatever age we are. Because we have the present; we cannot be certain we have any future.

Of all things about our life death is the most certain. There is no better description of its origin than in the Bible. The first mention of death is in Genesis 2.17. Why not pick up a Bible and start at the beginning and read as far as there and let its impact hit you? To get that far in the Bible would take you 5 minutes.

"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that the eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". The issue was one of obedience or disobedience to man's Creator, God.

I can imagine the first man, Adam, wondering, "what is this thing death?" It sounded frightening but there had been no death hitherto to give the plain word meaning or content.

If you were to read a little further to chapter 3, Satan, the deceiver, already a disobedient spirit, is introduced to us as he introduces himself to Eve first and then Adam. "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3.4) he affirms. Then follows step by step the mechanics of deception and temptation. How pleasant sin appeared, how inconsequential, how alluring and – at the end – how ruinous! This knowledge which would be the making of them – why, it revealed to them that they were naked, it gave birth to shame. Read it for yourself.

So it is in principle with all knowledge which is come by in defiance of God.

Bible believing Christians trust that what we have here is God's own revealing of what actually happened. None of us were there at creation. Only two people were present at this far off event. The only alternative belief system concerning origins is the system of evolution. But, seeing that nobody was there then, it is also speculation. But that system has its origin in man; fallen man; the design of the system is not to save mankind but to drag us down. It has no care for the souls of individual persons.

That is why we go so strongly on the truth of the Bible.

Later in Genesis 3 (please read it for yourself) you may read how the ground was cursed for Adam's sake and the doom pronounced, "dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return". The horror of death was then brought home – God killed animals (the first occasion of death) to make skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. Quivering death shocked them too late.

The rebellion of our first parents has been passed down in our DNA ever since. We are sinners by nature. And so has mortality with all its attendant decay.

This is the framework of the predicament in which we find ourselves that we shall one day die. It is a Biblical framework which Christians take to be God's own framework. As I say, it is a matter of faith. But so is every other alternative. Science draws conclusions from data; but if the interpretation of data is for any reason faulty; or if the conclusions are coloured by the sinful heart of any given scientist (for we are all sinners) then there is a wide margin for error in a matter so close to our souls' welfare. You will understand why a substantial number prefer the Biblical explanation. And we would seek you to be one of them.

So, in Hebrews 9.27 the Bible declares, "as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many". Precisely because we must die, and afterwards be raised to give an account of our lives to God; and precisely because eternal condemnation could be the only possible outcome, Jesus Christ made an atonement for sins once and for all on the cross at Calvary.

He bore the punishment for the sins of every believer while hanging upon the cross. If we repent and believe that gospel we shall be saved.

Some years ago I published a small booklet entitled "Swift to its Close" to help those who knew they were dying. To know you are dying is an intensely personal matter. It takes the form of a reading from the Bible each morning and each evening for a month accompanied by reflections to help us prepare for our death.

Seeing that we all must die it is useful for anybody. Useful also for those who may be looking after the dying. Some have found it helpful to read to the dying who do not have the strength now to read for themselves.

I have taken the liberty of including with this letter two sample pages. I can supply free copies or it can be downloaded from the church website. Again, we might say, confidentiality reigns.

On the basis of the view of life which I have outlined I cannot do better than plead with you as a pastor in the words of Ezekiel who pleads with you as a prophet – all in the name of God who pleads with you in your innermost beings:-

"Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die?...I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye" (Ezekiel 18. 31-32).

And in the words of Moses, "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life…that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days" (Deuteronomy 30. 19-20).

The alternative is ominous. Jesus speaks of dying unforgiven in these words, "Ye shall die in your sins" John 8. 21,24.

Not only ominous but explicit. "If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins". John 8.24.

Yours sincerely in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,