We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the word to come.
The Nicene Creed.

Death is an emotive and fascinating subject. At one time it was considered impolite to talk about it. Nowadays books on death and dying occupy the best-seller lists and talking about death and dying is considered normal.

The Church has always been prepared to talk about death and it does this at two levels. Firstly it talks about that unavoidable event, my personal death, the full stop at the end of my life. Secondly it talks about an equally unavoidable event, the death of the world as we know it.

What Happens when we Die?
Popular mythology says that when we die our souls leave our bodies and go somewhere else. The souls of the good people go to heaven and eternal bliss. The souls of the bad people go to hell and everlasting torment. Fortunately, for most of us, this is not the way the Church sees it.

The Anglican Church’s teaching on death, as on most other things, is contained in the Scriptures.

The Old Testament says very little about life after death. Some Old Testament books do talk about Sheol, a kind of shadow existence, but that hardly qualifies as life. The New Testament talks about an afterlife but the New Testament writers do not see this afterlife as another life so much as a continuation of the life we currently share with the resurrected Jesus; a quality of life we call eternal.

Saint John, for example, talks a lot about eternal life. He reports Jesus as saying, ‘...he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life’. (John 5:24)

For John, to have eternal life was, through Jesus, to share the life of the eternal God and that is a present experience, not something that happens only after we die. Eternal life is indestructible and it is inconceivable that one who already has eternal life could be destroyed by death.

But the Church goes further. As stated in the Creed, we believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The resurrection of the dead

Again, popular mythology has sometimes been assumed to be the teaching of the Church and visions of long dead bodies rising from the grave have caused many intelligent people to reject this teaching altogether. A very basic knowledge of the food cycle tells us that, if the popular mythology is true, when the trumpet sounds there will be a lot of souls fighting over the same recycled matter.

Again, fortunately for us, neither the Church nor the New Testament encourages such a view.

The foundation for our Christian belief in the resurrection of the body lies in the resurrection of Jesus. God raised Jesus from death and it is our Christian belief, founded on the scriptures, that those who are in Christ will share his resurrected life.

We saw in Study 10 that the Risen Christ was not at first recognised by his disciples. Yet having spoken and eaten with the Risen Christ they were convinced that this was Jesus, the same Jesus they had followed and trusted for the previous three years. His outward appearance was somehow different but his personality, the ‘real Jesus’, was the same. This is what the Creeds mean when they talk of the resurrection of the body.

When we die we, like Jesus, will each retain our distinctive personalities. We will
continue to be loved and sustained by the God who numbers the hairs on our heads and loves each of us individually.

Can we know more than that? Do we need to know more than that? Enough to know that the God who never gives up is unlikely to give us up merely because we die.

In his Letter to the Church in Corinth Paul speaks to those who want to know more. He explains the resurrection of the body with an analogy taken from nature: ‘But someone will ask, how are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body... So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable. It is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.’ (1 Corinthians 15:35ff)

But again, that is not all the Church has to say about death.

The end of the age

Every so often someone appeals to the Bible and announces the end of the world. Their only mistake lies in attaching a time and a date to that event because the Bible does look to a time when this present age will be replaced by the Rule of God.

This is the other side of our Christian hope. We look forward to our resurrection in Christ but we also look forward to ‘the life of the world to come’; that time when the process of history will reach its climax and the Kingdom of God will be experienced in all its fullness.

Jesus described the coming of this Kingdom in word pictures. It will come like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43), or like an unexpected bridegroom (Matthew 25:13). It will be like a harvest when the wheat will be gathered into the barn (Matthew 13:30); it will be like a wedding feast (Matthew 24:1-4); it will be like a flood (Matthew 27:37-39); it will be a Day of Judgement when men and women will be seen as they really are (Matthew 25:31-46).

This wealth of illustration should warn us not to be too literal in our predictions about the Kingdom. Jesus said, ‘No one knows when that day or hour will come - neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; only the Father knows’. (Mark 13:22)

The important thing is not when or how God’s Kingdom will come, but the knowledge that it will come and when it comes all things will be made new. ‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.’ (1 Corinthians 13:12)

The Judgement

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.
The Nicene Creed

The Church teaches that history - my personal history and the history of the world - will come to an end and that at the end of history lies Judgement.

Past ages have painted the Judgement in images of fire, pain and horror. Such images have been the tools of hell-fire preachers and heretics and witches have been tortured and burned in the misguided belief that suffering in this world would save them from an infinitely worse plight in the world to come.

But the Scriptures tell us that the Judgement will not be a terrifying celestial law court so much as a final revelation of what each man and woman has become.

In speaking of Judgement, Jesus referred to two classes of people: the saved and the lost. In his parables he pictured them as sheep and goats, wise and foolish girls, and good and bad servants. His message was clear. The Judgement is now and men and women must decide, right now, to be with God or against God. We are our own judges until, at the end of history, each of us will be judged according to what we have already become.

That is not a comfortable thought, until we remember that our judge will be Jesus, who is: ‘...not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.’ (Hebrews 4:15)