

July 6th 2014: Four Faces of the Church #4 The Eternal Face.
2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Four Faces of the Church. Such is the title of this series of messages, and it relates to the image of ourselves as a church that we need to project out to others.

And today we come to the fourth Face which is: **THE FACE OF ETERNITY**

If the church of Christ was a shop in which we displayed our wares, there at the forefront would be this huge billboard declaring Eternity with Jesus, with a note saying :Free of Charge. A gift of Almighty God for you, paid for by God the Son on the cross at Calvary and confirmed as real by His resurrection.

Arthur Stace was born in Balmain, in the inner-west of Sydney. The child of alcoholics, he was brought up in poverty.

In order to survive, he resorted to stealing bread and milk and searching for scraps of food in bins. By the age of 12, Stace, with virtually no formal schooling, had become a ward of the state. As a teenager, he became an alcoholic and was subsequently sent to jail at 15. Afterwards, he worked as a "cockatoo" or a look-out for a Two-up "school". In his twenties, he was a scout for his sisters' brothels. In March 1916, at age 26, he enlisted for World War I. He suffered recurring bouts of bronchitis and pleurisy, which led to his medical discharge on 2 April 1919.

Stace converted to Christianity on the night of 6 August 1930, after hearing an inspirational sermon by the Reverend R. B. S. Hammond at St. Barnabas Church, Broadway. Two years later, on 14 November 1932, Arthur was further inspired by the preaching of evangelist John G. Ridley, on "The echoes of Eternity" from Isaiah 57:15:

John Ridley's words, ***"Eternity, Eternity, I wish that I could sound or shout that word to everyone in the streets of Sydney. You've got to meet it, where will you spend Eternity?"*** proved crucial in Stace's decision to tell others about his faith. In an interview two years before he died, Stace said,

"Eternity went ringing through my brain and suddenly I began crying and felt a powerful call from the Lord to write Eternity." (Even though he was illiterate and could hardly write his own name *Arthur*, legibly)....."the

word 'Eternity' came out smoothly, in a beautiful copperplate script. I couldn't understand it, and I still can't."

After eight or nine years, he tried to write something else, "Obey God" and then five years later, "God or Sin" but he could not bring himself to stop writing "Eternity".

The Sydney City Council brought him to the attention of the police as they had rules about the defacing of pavements, so much so that he narrowly avoided arrest around twenty-four times. Each time he was caught, he responded with, "But I had permission from a higher source".

Several mornings a week for the next 35 years, Stace left his wife, Pearl and their home around 5am to go around the streets of Sydney and chalk the word "Eternity" on footpaths, train station entrances and anywhere else he could think of. It is estimated that he wrote the word around 500,000 times over the 35 years.

God has given His people, His Church, the monopoly on this message of Eternity. Others may suggest that they can provide a way to a happy life after death that can be found through some other philosophy or through one's own goodness and endeavour. Yet God, through His Church, His Word, and by His Spirit proclaims this as a certainty: Acts 17:30

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ confirms the Eternity that is to come. It also reveals that the manner of this life after death will be dependent on the outcome of God's justice, as He will judge all upon the basis of how we have lived according to His standards of righteousness. A worrying thought for everyone, because if we fall short of that, and we all will, then the penalty is unthinkable.

So there will be life after death for all....that can't be avoided....but what can be avoided by trusting in Jesus and then living out that trust in Him while still on earth, is that horrific penalty. This is the good news that the church declares. That a wonderful eternity is available as a gift but it must be

received through repentance of sin and a personal commitment to the Lordship of Jesus as God the Son.

The Apostle Paul was so aware of the importance of sharing this message that he gave his whole life over to preaching the Gospel and building up those who received it. He truly wanted people to be aware of the huge danger of dying without Jesus as their Saviour because of this judgment that is to come. And he would not stop talking about this even though he suffered greatly for doing so, and eventually gave up his life rather than remain silent.

But as well as preaching about the judgment to come Paul loved to share about the wonder of an eternity lived with Jesus, and he does exactly that in 2 Corinthians 5. As part of God's Church he declares the wonder of an eternity that is available to all who by faith would receive it, and he speaks out of his own personal experience.

Look with me at 2 Cor 5:1 and you will note that he uses the expression we, because here he is talking for himself and his young assistant Timothy.

And what he goes on to say is that ***"we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands"***.

Now of course Jesus mentioned something similar to His disciples before He died when He said to them as recorded in John 14:1-3

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."

Then after His resurrection Jesus spent a period of 40 days with His disciples teaching them about the things He had prepared for them, and how they should now live in anticipation of those things. And Paul would have been aware of that teaching and indeed, his summary of the Gospel in 1 Cor 15 was probably based on that.

But there is something extra that hovers behind Paul's, **we know**, in 2 Cor 5:1 and it is an experience of heaven that God gave Paul towards the beginning of his ministry. We read about it in 2 Cor 12:2-4

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

Paul saw what God has prepared for believers in glory and it gave him a yearning to be there that stayed with him the rest of his life. He knew, but was unable to describe, a little about the eternal house that awaits us in glory. And he knew that it is so amazing that it reveals this body as just a temporary dwelling. A feeble tent that is at the mercy of all the storms and burdens and uncertainty of life.

Is it any wonder that Paul says in v4-5

For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

A little later Paul goes on to say that at the moment we live by faith and not sight. We accept the testimony of the hundreds who saw and listened to Christ after His resurrection, and the words of those inspired by the HS to write about such things in the Bible, and we do so by faith.

But one day we will live by sight when we see Him and will be with Him forever.

Charles Hodge writing in the 19th century said ***that this is the object of the apostle's longing desire. It was not death, nor mere exemption from suffering; but to be raised to that higher state of existence in which all that was mortal, earthly, and corrupt about him should be absorbed in the life of God, that divine and eternal life arising from his wonderful vision, and consisting in perfect knowledge, holiness and blessedness.***

And understanding of this makes Paul's words in 2 Cor 2:9 even more glorious and meaningful when he says

No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him

Paul had seen something of this in his vision, but only enough for him to realize that the fullness of what awaits the believers is beyond our comprehension.

This is the message of Eternity that the Church needs to be known for. A message that delivers the bad news in order to better reveal the good news of the gospel. A message proclaimed in the New Testament and by God's people down through the ages. A message that moved Arthur Stace, as part of Christ's Body the Church, to tears and sent him out to write the word "eternity" over 500,000 times on the streets of Sydney. The Church is The Face of Eternity. And we do well to ask God what He has planned for you and I to do as His church, to help promote the message of Eternity to others while we still have time to do so.