

We Were Made To Last Forever.

Sermon for St Pauls 31st October 2004

A friend of mine rang on Friday night.

“Would you be able to preach on Sunday?” he asked.

I think there was the sound of reluctance in my response as I reminded him that I was rostered on to preach in a couple of weeks anyway. “Why do you want me to preach?”

“I’ve been to the doctor’s today and been told I have to have urgent surgery,” he said. “Right now I don’t have the emotional reserves for preaching.”

“Well, sure,” I replied. “I’ll do it for you. What’s the topic?”

“We Were Made To Last Forever.”

A couple of years ago I wrote an article that began “Surgery happens when you were planning to do something else.”

As Jane Austen might say, this is “a truth universally acknowledged.” – we are usually reminded of our own mortality when we least expect it. Everything is going along fine, and then there’s your local GP with a grim face asking whether you were planning to do anything important next week.

I’m ALWAYS planning to do something important next week, but when my appendix decided to erupt a couple of years ago, after having been perfectly well behaved for 55 years, somehow next week’s plans took on a suddenly diminished importance.

The surgeon who removed what was left of my offending appendix later told me “it was a bad one.” From that I think I was intended to receive the impression that this doctor, a true impresario of the intestine, had delivered me from certain death. However, since I am completely stupid when it comes to assessing dangers to my own mortality, I passed this off as the surgeon trying to convince me that his four-figure invoice was money well spent. Until, a week or two later while having my scars checked over by the droll Doctor Teh at the Bayswater Medical Centre he said, “Oh well, you could’ve died.”

Hello! Could’ve died? You mean like “could’ve died?”

I pretty much decided that I was real glad I hadn’t died. In fact, I was real glad to be alive rather than dead. Furthermore, I realised I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to die – a lot.

Now, at this point, I had a theological problem. Because I’m a Christian–this may be news to some. As a Christian I believe in Heaven. I have been singing songs about Heaven since I was a little devil.

This world is not my home, I'm passing through.

And

Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away.

And

When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

Yeah, I'll be there. Screaming and kicking, I'll be there. When that roll is called up yonder, I want to be on leave. Down Yonder. At the beach.

Come on, let's admit it. None of us wants to die. Living is cool, man.

There's this story about a court jester in the time of Ali Baba and the 40 thieves who got sentenced to death by the Caliph. For a long time, the court jester had entertained the Caliph at Baghdad and his court, by keeping them amused whenever called upon.

But in a moment of thoughtlessness, he had told a joke that displeased the ruler and the Caliph had ordered him to death.

"However" said the Caliph, "in consideration of the merry jests you've told me all these years, I will let you choose how you are to die."

"O most generous Caliph," replied the jester, "if it's all the same to you, I choose death by old age."

Now here's the theological question. If we are meant for heaven, why do we cling so much to life?

The answer has less to do with the wondrous way God made us, than to do with our limited ability to think beyond our own imaginings.

Because the truth is that we ARE made to last forever. We are made for eternity. Indeed, Ecclesiastes 3:11 says "ECC 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

God has set eternity in each of our hearts. He made us in such a way that deep down, in the depths of our hearts, in the centre of our self-awareness, in that place of our mind that constitutes our very selves, we understand ourselves to be eternal beings.

No wonder, we don't want to die. Dying is wrong. We are eternal beings. God made us that way. And we know it, in our hearts.

We have an inborn instinct that longs for immortality. And, as Rick Warren says in this book *The Purpose Driven Life* “This is because God designed you, in his image, to live for eternity. Even though we know everyone eventually dies, death always seems unnatural and unfair. The reason we feel we should live forever, is that God wired our brains with that desire!”

Now despite our self-beliefs to the contrary, human beings are not very rational beings. We live on our emotions and perceptions, while convincing ourselves that we live on our intellect and rational ability to make sound judgements. But as the writer of Ecclesiastes points out “He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Even though a loving God has put the notion of eternity in our hearts, we cannot work out what that means. Instead of trying to grasp the wisdom of God, we rely on our own resources.

The key idea here is that since we live in a time-bound and finite world, a world with a beginning and an end, and this is all we know from our own resources, we try to squeeze the idea of eternity into that framework. Well, it doesn't work. It's just wrong.

When we try to squeeze God's universe into our universe, we end up with phrases like the title of today's talk “We Were Made to Live Forever.” The idea we carry around in our heads is one of time, rolling on and on, day after day, never ending. But this is not eternity. This is just more and more time.

And God does not live in time. God lives beyond time. If we keep our brains stuck in the human universe we shall say things like “God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow” which is true as long as you live in a universe that has time, that has a yesterday, today and a tomorrow.

But eternity is something else again. Eternity is beyond time. In Heaven there is no yesterday, no today, no tomorrow. Time is a human dimension. Eternity is a heavenly dimension.

Someone may ask “If I go to heaven after I die, where was I before I was born?”

The answer is that the idea of before and after is only a valid idea here on earth. In heaven, there is no such thing as before and after. There is eternity.

About now, I guess most of our brains are starting to hurt, so let's have a look at 2CO 5:1 *Now 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.*

See how the Bible describes the difference between our earthly life and our heavenly existence?

In the first place, our earthly body is simply a tent. Something temporary. Something to be folded up and placed in the boot when we move to a building in heaven. Not just a building, but an eternal house. And just to try to convince us that we should not be thinking in human terms, Paul says it is a house not built by human hands.

The challenge as I see it, and experience it, is to keep trying to think in God's terms, and not in my own terms. This is why every Christian is, or should be, a theologian. Theology is just the act of thinking about God, or thinking about how God thinks. The more we try to get into the mind of God, the more we get a perspective on our tent-like existence here on earth.

Rick Warren asks "What is it going to be like in eternity with God? Frankly, the capacity of our brains cannot handle the wonder and greatness of heaven. It would be like trying to describe the Internet to an ant. It's futile. Words have not been invented that could possibly convey the experience of eternity. The Bible says, 1CO 2:9 *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*"

And the next verse says: *but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.* Yes, God has planted the idea of eternity in our hearts. We know, in our hearts, that we are created for something beyond this life.

When we spent nine months in our mother's womb I'll bet we thought that was the whole universe. And when she started to push me out, I think I was probably both resentful and fearful. From the warmth and security of the womb into the harsh, cold, and bottom-slapping world. No thanks, I'll stay right where I am.

Birth and death are not options. But just as birth is not a beginning, death is not an end. God offers us an opportunity beyond our lifetime.

Rick Warren makes the point that since we know this, we can begin to live now in the light of it. If this life we know on earth were all there is, then what we do wouldn't matter. But life on earth has eternal consequences.

We live surrounded by people who don't get this. They live life for themselves. They try to cram their lives full of self-centred pleasures, because, after all, you can't take it with you.

Well, the message of our faith is that what we do on earth does go with us. And for eternity. There are eternal repercussions from everything we do on earth. As Rick Warren says "Every act of our lives strikes some chord that will vibrate in eternity...To make the most of our lives, we must keep a vision of eternity continually in our mind and the value of it in our hearts."

Inside the largest bell at the old Sydney Post Office on Martin Place is a word written in yellow chalk. Someone wrote it there in about 1963. The letter 'I' has almost vanished, but the word 'Eternity' can still be seen, written in an elegant copperplate running writing with the tail of the letter y forming a underlining flourish.

The word Eternity, written in chalk in this distinctive way, was a mystery debated in the newspapers and on radio in Sydney for almost 40 years. The word Eternity appeared on footpaths over half a million times.

In 1956, twenty-five years after the word started to appear regularly on Sydney footpaths, it was discovered that Eternity was the evangelistic work of a man named Arthur Stace.

Arthur Stace was born in 1884. His mother, father, two brothers and two sisters were all alcoholics. His sisters owned and ran a brothel. At 12, Arthur Stace was made a ward of the State. At 14 he was working in a coal mine. At 15 he was in gaol for the first of many visits. Already he was well on the way to alcoholism.

When he was 26 he attended a meeting for men at an inner-city Sydney church. Most of the men were there for a feed, but to get the food they had to endure a sermon first.

Noticing six tidily dressed people near the front, he asked the man sitting next to him “Who are they?” “I reckon they’d be the Christians,” he replied. Arthur said “Well, look at them and look at us. I’m having a go at what they have got,” and he slipped down onto his knees and prayed.

Hardly a remarkable event, on the surface, but he found that he was soon able to give up drinking and said “As I got my self-respect back people were more decent to me.” And soon he was also able to get steady employment.

Some months later Arthur heard a well-known give-em-Hell kind of preacher, the Rev John Ridley. The preacher said, or I guess he shouted, “I wish I could shout ETERNITY through all the streets of Sydney.”

Arthur said that the preacher “repeated himself and kept shouting ETERNITY, ETERNITY, and his words were ringing through my brain as I left the church. Suddenly I began crying and I felt a powerful call from the Lord to write ETERNITY. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket and I bent down and wrote it.”

Arthur whose limited education had left him barely able to write his own name, found he could write ETERNITY, however, quite elegantly a metre wide on the footpath.

For the next 40 years, Arthur would leave home around 5AM after an hour’s prayer and just go where he felt God directed him that particular day and write ETERNITY every hundred metres or so as he went along. By 10 o’clock he’d be done and go home.

I grew up in Sydney in the 1950s and the ETERNITY man was part of my childhood reality. His word became part of Sydney life. When Sydney Square was created in 1977 his word was formed in wrought aluminium and permanently embedded in the square’s pebbles.

And then at the very end of Sydney’s half-hour fireworks display on the eve of 2000 there emerged out of the smoke and light, the word again. ETERNITY. The Hope we have in Jesus Christ being preached to the city and the whole world.

Ironically, the Lonely Planet Guide to Sydney says “you would have to die and go to heaven to find a better setting for a city.”

You and I were made for Eternity. I pray that we shall continue to learn to live in the light of this reality.

A-men