

The Story of

Mr Eternity

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The New Millennium began with a bang in Sydney, Australia. On the tick of midnight 31 December 1999 the promised fireworks display erupted over Sydney Harbour to the delight of more than a million people watching from the foreshores and from a vast flotilla of watercraft on the harbour.

This was the display to end all displays designed to outdo every other New Year's celebration on planet earth, and it achieved its goal. For 24 hours the world media ran continuous commentary of celebrations on every part of the globe. From remote islands in the Pacific Ocean, across Asia to the Middle East, and on into Europe to France's Eiffel Tower and England's Millennium Dome. Then, the United States of America, in the freeze of winter, joined the celebration of a thousand years; but nothing compared with the brilliance of Sydney Harbour on 1st January 2000.

Sydney Harbour has a natural beauty unsurpassed by any harbour in the world, and the mild summer drew nearly one in three of its four million citizens to the harbourside celebrations and Sydney's weather was idyllic.

Many may heap their plaudits on the organizers, but there is another reason for Sydney's New Millennium success. A reason that can be summed up in one word that hung suspended from the giant arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, midst the jetting rockets exploding above and the deluge of light that poured from the roadway beneath it: That word was "Eternity".

Like a message from heaven flashed across the world stage to billions of souls, it shone like a

beacon, warning that time is swiftly passing and we are creatures of eternity. This was a sermon in a word, the magnitude of which can only be grasped as one understands the story behind it.

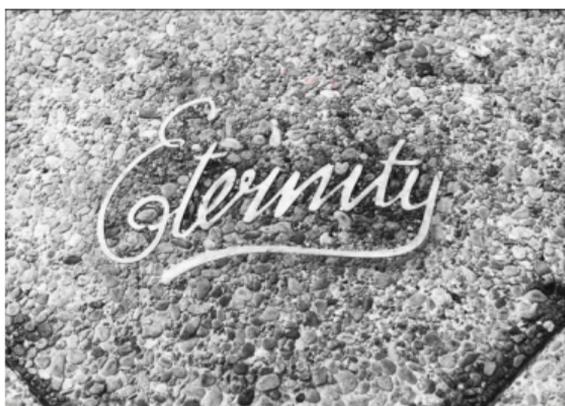


In down-town Sydney, set in the pavement at Sydney Square, is the same inescapable word, "Eternity", in faultless copperplate writing. It perpetuates the memory of Sydney's unique citizen, Arthur Stace, otherwise known as Mr Eternity.

When the Sydney architect, Ridley Smith, unveiled the plaque in Sydney Square in July 1977, a note in the Sydney Morning Herald drew attention to Arthur's one-word sermon:

"In letters almost 21 cm high is the famous copperplate message Eternity. The one-word sermon gleams in wrought aluminium. There's no undue prominence; no garish presentation; merely the simple Eternity on pebbles as Arthur Stace would have wanted it."

Arthur was a thin little uneducated man who could barely write his name. His wife would read him his



mail and he would tell her what to write in reply; yet year after year this incredible man rose at 5 o'clock each morning to walk the streets of Sydney and its far-flung suburbs to write with chalk in flawless copperplate style

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on the pavements just one word, "*Eternity*". It is estimated that this simple, yet profound message, was repeated over 500,000 times. The word was mysterious, for no one knew who was responsible for this elegant graffiti.

Newspaper journalists wrote about it and people everywhere discussed it, but who was responsible? No one could predict where the word would appear next. It even appeared in Melbourne, 1,000 miles away.

There was no doubt the same person was responsible but who did it? Journalists referred to its author as "*Mr Eternity*", and each day people would remark, "*Mr Eternity has struck again!*" Occasionally his sermon changed to "*Obey God*", but quickly reverted to the simple one-word sermon, "*Eternity*". One day in 1956, after many years of mystery, Lisle Thompson, Arthur's pastor at Burton Street Baptist Tabernacle, Darlington, saw him writing on the pavement. "*Are you Mr Eternity?*" he asked. Back came the answer, "*Guilty, your honor!*"

Once Mr Eternity's identity was known media interviews were arranged and the *Daily Telegraph* published a full report on 21 June 1956. The mystery was solved at last. In 1994 a TV documentary was shown across the nation.

Arthur Stace was born in Balmain in 1884; His father was an alcoholic and his mother ran a brothel. He had two brothers, both of whom died of alcoholism. His two sisters ran a brothel.

During childhood the five Stace children had to fend for themselves in a home where domestic violence was the norm. The children frequently slept on hessian bags under the house to

escape the wrath of a violent, drunken father.

Needless to say, Arthur's childhood was a daily battle for survival. He stole to eat and at the age of 12, was made a State Ward. He received no education.



When 14 years old Arthur went to work in a coal mine, presumably the old Balmain coal mine, and at 15 served his first gaol sentence. Even at this young age he was a heavy drinker.

In his twenties he moved from Balmain to Surry Hills adjacent to Sydney Central Railway Station where he occupied himself with running "sly grog" for pubs and acting as "cockatoo", or lookout, for gambling houses and brothels. On many occasions he was arrested and sentenced.

When the Great War of 1914-18 began, Arthur escaped the life he was living and enlisted in the AIF. He was sent to the battlefields of France, where he served as stretcher-bearer and drummer. He witnessed the horrors of warfare and received injuries that impaired the sight of one of his eyes. In 1919 he returned to Australia suffering from shell shock and the effects of mustard gas poisoning.

Back home in Sydney, Arthur soon slipped into a life of alcohol, gambling and crime. He wandered the streets feeding out of rubbish bins. Methylated spirits became a cheap escape. He found he could buy a bottle for sixpence and that would keep him in drunken oblivion for a whole day. Next day he drank water to reactivate the methylated spirits. On his own testimony, Arthur had become "*a petty criminal, a bum, and a metho-drinker*".

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Alcohol which had destroyed his father now controlled him, and he staggered into a police station and begged to be locked up, but the officer refused. Evangelist John G Ridley, who knew Arthur personally, records that he staggered away saying,

"When I don't want them to put me in, they do it: now when I want them to put me in they shut me out."

By 1930 the world was in the grip of the Great Depression. Unemployed men walked the streets and one port of call was St Barnabas Anglican Church in Broadway, where Archdeacon RBS Hammond ran "*A Meeting for Needy Men*". The Archdeacon was a strong evangelical with a great concern for people. In his meeting he presented the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only solution for man's need, and afterwards supplied each man with a cup of tea and a rock cake.

On the 6th August 1930 Arthur Stace wandered into this "*Meeting for Needy Men*" and found 300 seated in the hall. Looking around he saw a few well dressed men standing near the door and he asked the man next to him, who happened to be one of Sydney's best known criminals, "*Who are they?*" The reply came back, "*I'd reckon they'd be Christians.*" Arthur said, "*Well look at them and look at us. I'm havin' a go at what they've got.*"

After the Gospel had been presented and each man had received his rock cake and tea, Arthur made his way, across Broadway into Sydney University Park. There, under a big Morton Bay fig tree he fell on his knees and with tears of repentance streaming down his face cried out, "*God, be merciful to me a sinner!*" That cry was

the pivot on which Arthur's life turned. His was a genuine conversion to Christ, and for the rest of his life he was a living testimony to God's saving and keeping power. At that instant God heard his cry and he became a child of God. He could say, as the hymn writer has put it, "*My sins which were many are all washed away!*"



Later Arthur testified:

"I went in to get a cup of tea and a rock-cake, but I met the Rock of Ages."

Let those who doubt that God can hear a sinner's cry, and answer in infinite love to lift him into glorious liberty from sin's slavery, take heed to the testimony of this little metho-drinker and petty criminal who, by the grace of God, became Mr Eternity. And Arthur Stace is not the only one to experience the mercy of God. Millions have found the joy of salvation by trusting the Saviour. Not all had the same unfortunate background but all needed to be saved.

The Bible says,

*"If **any man** be in Christ he is a **new creature**, old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*

When Arthur Stace turned to God and found mercy he realized that every other person needed to do the same. That is why, for year after year, he walked the streets from the early hours of the morning preaching his one-word sermon, "*Eternity*".

"*Eternity*", to him was the everlasting destiny of every soul to be spent in heaven or hell, and

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concern for his fellow man drove him on day after day. He knew the forgiveness of God in his own life and wanted others to have the same assurance.

In November 1932 Evangelist John G Ridley MC conducted an evangelistic mission at the Burton Street Baptist Tabernacle in Darlinghurst, where Arthur was attending. John Ridley had also served in the fields of France and had won a Military Cross for bravery in battle. A German bullet had passed through his face and impaired his speech; but God had wonderfully restored him to become a most eloquent, forceful preacher, and an outstanding evangelist. Little did he realize what impact his sermon would have on Arthur Stace when he preached on the text Isaiah 57:15:

"Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity."

Stressing the word eternity, the preacher cried, *"Eternity! Eternity! I wish I could sound or shout that word to everyone in the streets of Sydney. Eternity! You have to meet it. Where will you spend eternity?"*



Arthur Stace recalled that meeting. He said, "Eternity was ringing through my brain, and suddenly I began to cry and felt a powerful call from the Lord to write "Eternity". I had a piece of chalk in my pocket, and outside the Church I bent down right there and wrote it...The funny thing is, that before I wrote it I could hardly write my own name. I had no schooling and I couldn't have spelled "eternity" for a hundred quid. But

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



Over the next 23 years that one word, "eternity", was repeated more than 500,000 times, all over the city of Sydney, in country towns and in Melbourne; wherever he went.

It is an amazing turn of Divine providence that the Sydney architect, Ridley Smith, who unveiled the plaque inscribed with the word "Eternity" in the pavement of Sydney Square in July 1977, was the son of missionary parents serving with the China Inland Mission. His father named his son Ridley because of his great respect for Evangelist John Ridley, the very preacher who was used to change Arthur Stace into Mr Eternity.

Many stories have been told of this humble servant of Christ, for that indeed was what he was. From the day he met Christ under the Morton Bay fig tree in University park he felt he had a debt of love to pay. He was like the street woman who came into the house of Simon the Pharisee, and washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; he loved much because he was forgiven much.

Although no one knew the identity of Mr Eternity he did not go unnoticed. He recalled being apprehended by police.

"Twenty three times", he said, "I have been questioned (by the police) but I've never been arrested...the police have been very good to me. I know there's a rule about defacing the footpaths, but I've got authority from a higher Source."

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Once, in his early days, a policeman apprehended him with, "What are you doing writing on the pavement?" "Well," replied Arthur, "it is a word from the Bible which I want the people to read; and don't forget that when you were sworn-in to the Police Force you placed your hand on that Book." With that the officer turned away and Arthur continued his ministry.

Some tried to erase the word from the pavement, and one man followed him placing the letter 'm' before "eternity" making it "meternity". It was then that Arthur increased the size of the first letter and, as he said, "I tricked the bloke and made it a great big E".

Arthur was a tireless worker for God. He was 46 years old when he was saved and married at 57. He was employed as a cleaner in the city, but wherever he found an opportunity, he shared the Gospel of Christ. For many years he preached on the corner of George and Bathurst Streets in the heart of Sydney. His method was unusual. First he would place his Bible on the ground, and then cover it with his hat. Next he would begin walking around the hat, pointing to it and calling out, "Look, it's alive! It's alive!"

Soon people would gather round; and then he would remove his hat, take up his Bible and proclaim, "It's alive! The Word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword...." quoting Hebrews 4:12 from the Bible.

In this way he got his audience, and never failed to tell the good news of the Saviour who had changed his life and given him hope for eternity.

Although Arthur could not read the Bible he had memorized much of its contents and quoted it

faultlessly. In Church services he had no need of a hymn book for he had memorized every verse. He was blessed with an incredible memory.



His ministry included leading prayer meetings in his Church at Burton Street, regular street meetings, helping at the Buckland Street Hostel, and the Francis Street Night Refuge.

On the 30th July 1967, in a nursing home, Mr Eternity suffered a stroke and passed over into the immediate presence of his Lord and Saviour. When he entered the nursing home in 1965, he remarked, *"I don't think I'll leave here under my own steam."*

It is said that the word "Eternity" can still be discerned on the bell in the old Sydney GPO Tower. How he put it there no one will ever know, but on the 1st of January 2000 that one-word sermon tolled far beyond the revellers on Sydney Harbour to possibly 2 billion viewers around the entire globe.

I venture to say that this was the most cost effective sermon ever preached by a little man with no theological qualifications and who, to the age of 46 years confessed himself *"a petty criminal, a bum, and a metho-drinker"*.



Arthur Stace has sown the seed and God had a message for all mankind in January 2000; it is the Gospel of Christ in John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"

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Life at best is very brief,
Like the falling of a leaf,
Like the binding of a sheaf,
Be in time;

Fleeting days are telling fast
That the die will soon be cast,
And the fatal line be past,
BE IN TIME!

Sinner, heed the warning voice,
Make the Lord your final choice,
Then all heaven will rejoice,
Be in time.

Come from darkness into light,
Come let Jesus make you right,
Come and start for Heaven tonight,
BE IN TIME!

What you do with Jesus Christ determines your eternal destiny.

What will you do with Jesus?
Neutral you cannot be.
Some day your heart will be asking,
What will He do with me?

The Bible says:

*"For by grace (undeserved favour) are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: **it is the gift of God**: Not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph. 2:8-9).*

*"As many as **received Him** (Jesus Christ), to them gave He power, to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name" (John 1:12).*

Free literature and help available from The Herald of Hope. See address on front cover.

(Gleaned from JG Ridley's book, "The Passing of Mr Eternity", from Mr Bruce Leghorn, and the author's personal knowledge. Photograph was supplied by Ramon Williams of Worldwide Photos.)