



**Arthur Stace (1884-1967)
Proclaiming the Lord of Eternity**

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name [is] Holy; I dwell in the high and holy [place,] with him also [that is] of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones. (Isaiah 57:15).

As the year 1999 rolled into 2000, the Sydney Harbour bridge was emblazoned with the word *Eternity*. It was a surprising way for an avowedly secular nation to celebrate the passing of time. Humanly speaking, it was meant to be a tribute to Arthur Stace – known as Mr Eternity - who was converted from a life of alcoholism and petty crime. His parents were poor drunkards, and his two sisters and two brothers lived lives of drunkenness and prostitution. As a boy, Arthur skipped as much school as possible, became a state ward, and spent his first cheque in a hotel. World War I proved something of an interlude, but he was soon back into his alcoholic habits, despite signing the pledge a number of times.

In 1930 Stace dropped into St Barnabas' Church on Broadway in Sydney, and determined that Christianity was the answer to his decrepit lifestyle. Sometime later, in Burton Street Baptist Church, Stace heard John Ridley preach on Isaiah 57:15 ('Thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity'). Ridley cried out: '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?'

Stace was a shy, frail-looking little man who was not illiterate, but who wrote without distinction and spelt with even less. Yet, to cite his own words, '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 right there and wrote it.' He continued to do so for the next thirty-three years, at least fifty times a day. The only change in his practice coming when he turned the first 'e' into a capital to thwart a man who tried to deface the word by placing an 'm' in front of it, thus turning it into 'meternity'.

Somehow, Stace managed to continue to write *Eternity* in chalk on the streets of Sydney in a beautiful copperplate script. Under cover of darkness he carried out his task, and his identity was only discovered in 1956 when his minister, Lisle Thompson, watched him take out his crayon and write his message on the pavement. By the time of his death, Stace had written what Bruce Beaver called 'the one big word' some 500,000 times.

In popular mythology, Stace was an illiterate man who proved capable of writing just one word. Despite his reputation in some circles, he had some literacy skills, and these developed as he grew in grace. He also possessed a lively wit, and, referring to his stays in gaol, would warn those who came to hear him to 'Beware, your sins will find you *in*.'

To Sir David Griffin, a former Lord Mayor of Sydney, Stace's ministry was just 'a delicious piece of eccentricity', but God used this ill-educated man to proclaim his Word. 'Eternity' is indeed a fitting message to a culture immersed in the here and now, and reluctant to ponder the issues of life and death, of time and eternity. The poet, Douglas Stewart, summed up Stace's gospel motives:

*It moved in him, it struck him deep with sorrow
That men should live in time with all its vanity
Or think they did, and yet were in Eternity.*

In his own way, Stace was seeking to say what the distinguished Puritan theologian, Stephen Charnock, said: '*By frequent meditation of God's eternity, we should become more sensible of the trifling nature of the world.*'

(Peter Barnes, used with permission)