

Inspiring Australian Saints / Arthur Stace

Introduction

Last Sunday Matt introduced us to the word saint, which means 'holy one'.

We have a tendency to think of saints as those who appear in stain glass windows. However, we learnt last week that saints are not a select few or a special class of Christian, rather, God defines each and every one of us as a 'holy one'. We are all saints. Sainthood is the identity of every follower of Jesus. We are saints not because we are good or holy in our own right but because that's who God says we are.

Turn to the person next to you and introduce yourself as Saint Bob or Saint Pat. We need to elevate our thinking about who we are and what we can do on the basis of God's declaration over our lives.

Over the next few weeks we will be looking at the lives of ordinary Australian Christians who were saints just like you and me. Today, we are looking at the life of a man called Arthur Malcolm Stace. **PowerPoint Image 1**

Arthur Stace was born in the slums of Balmain, Sydney in 1884. Both his parents were alcoholics and he was so neglected as a young boy that he survived by stealing bread and milk, and searching for scraps of food in garbage bins. By the age of 12, he had become a ward of the state. He had almost no education and he couldn't read or write.

Life was pretty tough for Arthur growing up. Impacted by poverty, no education and no good role models he turned to alcohol and commenced a life of crime. He was sent to jail for the first time at the age of 15. As a teenager, when he wasn't in jail he worked as a 'look out' for illegal gambling dens and as a scout for his two sisters who ran brothels.

To make things worse, he was shipped off to Europe when World War 1 began and was wounded and returned home blind in one eye.

However, on August 6 1930, aged 46 Arthur Stace wandered into St. Barnabas' Church in Broadway, Sydney. He was hungry, he was lonely and absolutely desperate to give up alcohol. He'd begun drinking

methyated spirits everyday and it was starting to send him insane.

Arthur heard the Gospel and when the church service finished, he walked across the road to a park and sat under an old Morton Bay fig tree and he asked God to forgive his sin, he surrendered his life to Christ and made a decision to become a follower of Jesus. Immediately, something supernatural happened to Arthur Stace. He was converted and in that moment was miraculously freed from his dependency upon alcohol. And as a result of his decision to allow Jesus to shape and mold his life things very quickly turned around for Arthur and he became a completely transformed person.

A few years later, whilst Arthur was listening to a sermon, the Minister who was preaching said he wished he could shout the word 'eternity' throughout the streets of Sydney.

In that moment Arthur knew he'd found his life mission – and that was to write the word 'eternity' on the footpaths of Sydney. There was one problem though. He couldn't write. However, Arthur experienced another miracle.

Many years later he explained, “Eternity went ringing through my brain and suddenly I began crying 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 spelt ‘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.”

For the next 35 years, at 4.00am every morning, Arthur would get out of bed and pray and ask God where he should go. Then whilst almost everyone else slept, he would walk or catch an early morning train and on pavements all over the suburbs of Sydney he would kneel down and write ‘e-t-e-r-n-i-t-y’. **PowerPoint 2**

He wanted to remind people that there is more to life than this life. We are eternal beings whose existence continues after we take our final breath.

Remarkably, Arthur did what he did for 30 years before it was discovered that he was the one who was responsible for this one-word sermon to the people of Sydney. He was the quiet achiever who wanted to be unnoticed and unrecognized. **PowerPoint 3**

However, when it finally came to light that Arthur was the author of this one-word sermon, Sydney City Council weren't too impressed by what they considered to be the defacing of their property. So they referred Arthur to the Police about twenty-four times. Each time he was caught, he responded with these words, "But I had permission from a higher source".

When he died in 1967, Arthur Stace had written the word 'eternity' more than half a million times.

Almost 33 years after his death as the year 2000 began, billions of people across the globe saw Arthur Stace's 'Eternity' emblazoned across the Sydney Harbour Bridge as part of Sydney's millennial celebrations. **PowerPoint 4.**

And I still remember the moment, we had gathered with friends to see in the New Year and watch Sydney's spectacular firework display. All of a sudden at the point of climax in the midst of the pyrotechnic extravaganza – there appeared Arthur Stace's 'Eternity' in that distinctive lettering for the entire world to see. It was overwhelming. It was just like God to take the lowest of the low and to give them pride of place at one of the most visible moments in world history! Who would've thought that an illiterate, ex derelict and drunk would take centre stage at the millennial celebrations? Certainly not Arthur Stace!

There are so many things that we can learn from Arthur Malcolm Stace's story. But I'd just like to highlight a handful of characteristics of saints that can be seen through the lens of his life.

1. Saints are faithful with the little

Saints are not superstars – they are faithful servants who do what they can with what they've got.

All Arthur Stace had was a piece of chalk and one word – yet he faithfully offered the little he had to God and invited God to use it.

I am reminded of the little boy who we are told in Matthew 14, gave to Jesus his five loaves and two fish. And Jesus was well able to multiply it to feed a multitude of hungry people.

In **1 Corinthians 4:1-2**, Paul the apostle writes, 'This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.'

The word that Paul uses for servant is the Greek word 'huperetes' = a rower on the lower level of those ancient ships. They were slaves whose job it was to pull the oars. Scholars suggest that Paul had in mind that Jesus is like the Captain of the ship who directs its course. And the role of us saints is to be the 'huperetes' that is we are to obediently and faithfully respond to whatever it is – no matter how great or how small that Jesus calls us to do.

2. Saints overcome adversity

Think of Arthur's upbringing and everything that he had going against him – lack of education, illiteracy, blindness in one eye and yet none of these things prevented him from serving Jesus and others.

There's a particular story that I love of a man called Roger Crawford, whose story appears in a book called *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Let me read an excerpt...

"Roger Crawford had everything he needed to play tennis—except two hands and a leg.

When Roger's parents saw their son for the first time, they saw a baby with a thumb-like projection extending directly out of his right forearm and a thumb and one finger stuck out of his left forearm.

He had no palms. The baby's arms and legs were shortened and he had only three toes on his shrunken right foot and a withered left leg, which would later be amputated.

The doctors' informed the Crawfords' that Roger would probably never walk or care for himself.

Fortunately Roger's parents didn't believe the doctors.

"My parents always taught me that I was only as handicapped as I wanted to be, " said Roger. "They never allowed me to feel

sorry for myself or take advantage of people because of my handicap.

Roger's father always encouraged him to get involved in sports, teaching Roger to catch and throw a volleyball and play backyard football after school. At age 12, Roger managed to win a spot on the school football team.

Before every game, Roger would visualize his dream of scoring a touchdown. Then one day he got his chance. The ball landed in his arms and off he ran as fast as he could on his artificial leg towards the goal line, his coach and teammates cheering wildly.

But at the 10-yard line, a guy from the other team caught up with Roger, grabbing his left ankle. Roger tried to pull his artificial leg free from the player's grasp, but instead ended up having his leg pulled off.

"I was still standing up," recalls Roger. "I didn't know what else to do so I started hopping towards the goal line. The referee threw his hands up in the air. Touchdown. You know, even better than the six points was the look on the other kid who was holding my artificial leg."

"Roger's love of sports grew and so did his self confidence. But every obstacle gave way to Roger's determination.

Eating in the lunchroom with other kids watching him fumble with his food proved very painful to Roger as did repeated

failures in typing class.

"I learned a very good lesson from typing class. You can't do everything-it's better to concentrate on what you can do."

"One thing Roger could do was swing a tennis racket. Unfortunately, when he swung it hard, his weak grip usually launched it into space. By luck, Roger stumbled upon an odd-looking tennis racket in a sports shop and accidentally wedged his finger between its double-barred handle when he picked it up.

"The snug fit made it possible for Roger to swing, serve and volley like an able-bodied tennis player. He practiced every day and was soon playing and losing matches.

But Roger persisted. He practiced and practiced and played and played. Surgery on the two fingers in his left hand enabled Roger to grip his special racket better, greatly improving his game. Although he had no role models to guide him, Roger became obsessed with tennis and in time he started to win.

Roger went on to play college tennis, finishing his tennis career with 22 wins and 11 losses. He later became the first physically handicapped player to be certified as a teaching professional by the United States Professional Tennis Association.

"The only difference between you and me is that you can see my handicap, but I can't see yours. We all have them.

When people ask me how I've been able to overcome my physical handicaps, I tell them that I haven't overcome anything.

I simply learned what I can't do—such as play the piano or eat with chopsticks—but more importantly, I've learned what I can do. Then I do it with all my heart and soul."

3. Saints have purpose

Arthur Stace discovered and lived out his life mission.

Ephesians 1:11, "It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for."

Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

God has something unique and special for each of his kids to do. We all have a life purpose, a destiny to fulfill.

1 Corinthians 12:7, "Each person is given something to do to show who God is."

Saints understand that they have something meaningful to contribute and as they flow in their purpose they show the world who God is.

4. Saints are humble

Arthur Stace performed for an audience of one. He went about his work for three decades without anyone being aware of who was responsible for the copperplate script that mysteriously appeared on Sydney streets. He'd go out in the dark and write anonymously. He wasn't seeking success, status or celebrity.

Philippians 1:5-8

[H]ave the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

5. Saints leave a legacy

Whilst he was alive Arthur Stace had no idea that one day:

- An opera called The Eternity Man would be made in honour of him, or a
- Movie of the same name would be made about him, or that
- The National Museum of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia both in Canberra would have an exhibition and a gallery devoted to his story, or that
- His simple one word sermon 'Eternity' would be inscribed on Sydney Harbour Bridge to be seen by billions, as part of the city's 2000 New Years Eve celebrations, or that
- The Eternity theme would be used again at the 2000 Olympics Opening Ceremony

The vast majority of saints will not have operas or movies made about their lives, or have museums and art gallery hold displays and exhibitions about their work, or have firework displays or Olympic Games ceremonies highlighting their achievements but saints will always leave a legacy that builds the Kingdom of God in some small way.

Conclusion

Let me finish with two things in the light of Arthur Stace's life as a saint:

Firstly, what is your one word message to the world?

For Arthur Stace he will ever be synonymous with the word 'Eternity'. If there were one-word you'd like to be associated with – what word would that be? And how is your life communicating that word?

The other incredibly important thing that I'd like to say is Arthur Stace's story reminds us of how powerful the Gospel is. Change - life transformation is always possible! The Gospel of Jesus is able to turn sinners into saints. A sinner is not necessarily a drunkard, a thief or a derelict. Sinners come in all kinds of shapes and sizes but sinners do have one thing in common – we are selfish and self-centered. And we need Jesus to set us free from our selves and help us become the people we were meant to be people who:

- Are faithful

- Overcome adversity
- Are humble
- Find purpose, and
- Leave a great legacy