

Eternity Now?

Lent Two

Sunday 12th March 2017

John 3:1-17



“Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes.” I am sure many of you agree. We may well choose to do without these things but they are inevitable. We pay taxes and we die!

With this in mind, have you ever thought about where you will spend eternity?

Kerry Packer, the well-known media baron and entrepreneur, died on Boxing Day 2005, aged 68 from kidney failure. But some time beforehand he suffered a heart attack while playing polo at Warwick Farm in Sydney. Kerry Packer was revived by paramedics after being clinically dead for six minutes. Later he received life-restoring surgery from the famous Dr Victor Chang.

In a press conference Kerry Packer spoke about his temporary oblivion - his six minutes of clinical death: *“I’ve been to the other side”* he said *“and let me tell you, son there’s (expletive) nothing there.....there’s no one waiting there for you, there’s no one to judge you.....so you can do whatever you bloody well like.”*

I don’t share Kerry Packer’s bold, somewhat haughty assumptions. I believe there is *“something there”*. Jesus tells us so by announcing he goes *“to prepare a place for you”* (John 14:2).

(2)

Moreover, the Gospels have a lot to say about the Kingdom of Heaven while the Book of Revelation continues to speak powerfully about the subject (see Revelation 21).

The recent success of the movie, Heaven is for Real, affirms the prospect that life after death is real for many people. A little boy, while having emergency surgery, is said to have an “out of body experience”. The boy describes how he looked down to see the doctor operating.

Moreover, he saw his mother calling people to pray in the waiting room while his father pleaded with God not to let his little boy die. The child also spoke about meeting his great-grandfather who died before he was born, his unborn sister who died in a miscarriage about whom no-one told him and, most importantly, the boy spoke about meeting Jesus face to face.

Now, one could dismiss all this by suggesting the boy’s revelations are nothing more than a series fanciful thoughts, at best, or a serious hallucination at worst.

However, there are many, many stories about near death experiences. These involve lights at the end of a long dark tunnel and visions of Jesus reaching to touch one’s hand. After listening to stories, that are often told with great sincerity, I am certainly not prepared to dismiss such experiences out of hand.

This morning we read about an encounter between Jesus and a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an important person. He is a member of the hierarchy who presided over the trial of Jesus and in this case, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night seeking answers to some critical issues of life.



(3)

Jesus presents this earnest religious enquirer with some provocative and rather profound responses. And here Jesus exhorts this supreme leader in the temple community to be *“born again”* or to be *“born from above”*. I spoke about this last week during my sermon presented as part of the Lenten Ecumenical Service at St Alban’s Anglican Church in Epping.

Now, in his response to Nicodemus, Jesus goes on to speak about his identity as the *“Son of Man”* who is to be *“lifted up”* that *“whoever believes in him may have eternal life”* (John 3:15).

The thing that jumps out to me today is Jesus’ reference to eternal life. It’s a common focus in John’s Gospel and the most obvious interpretation here is that Jesus is referring to life after death. Such an interpretation no doubt resonates with many as we ponder the question, where will I spend eternity?

Indeed, the utterances of Dwight L Moody, the famed 19th century evangelist, ring out here. On his death bed the old man looked up and said *“heaven is opening, this is my coronation day.”* For Dwight L Moody, death was the end of suffering and conflict. It was the beginning of glory and triumph in heaven.

But is this simply what Jesus really means?

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke together with the letters of St Paul, eternal life is generally presented as a future experience, an encounter we enter into after death. But John’s Gospel is different. Here eternal life is presented as a present possibility. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 5:24: *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.”*



(4)

In John's Gospel eternal life is described in the present, not the future tense. Here Jesus presents eternal life as an experience, as a quality of life and a manner of being that is offered today.

Friends, what is really meant here is that whenever Jesus is present, wherever the spirit of Christ reigns, the possibility of eternal life is real, it's very real!

This is what Jesus means when he says *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry"* (John 6:35). This is what Jesus means when he says *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12). Indeed, this is what Jesus means when he says *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live"* (John 11:25).

Friends, eternal life is not simply a promise concerning life after death, eternal life is now. Eternal life is offered when-ever and where-ever Jesus is present. Eternal life is life with and in Christ right this very minute!

"Eternity" has mostly been a futuristic thing for me. However, to be honest, as a youngster "eternity" never entered my mind. As a teenager and a young adult "eternity" never became part of my vocabulary because, like most others at that age, I thought I was immortal, that life would go on forever. Then as a parent and as a middle-aged professional, life was simply too busy to think about such things. But as one grows older "eternity" appears on the radar - and it's an important question.

The thing is, don't get too occupied with the future. Don't consume yourselves too much with the question, *"what happens after death?"* Don't fall into the trap of devaluing or even dismissing the present because your mind is totally focused on the heaven that is to come!

For the Good News is this. Eternity is not simply a case of what happens after you die. Eternity is now! Eternity touches each one of us right here as Jesus speaks with his life-giving, life-enriching words. These are words offered to sustain, uphold and nurture us through all the events of life, the good and the bad - and even death itself.

This is why Communion Sunday is so special. For, when we gather around the Lord's table not only do we remember what God has done for us in Christ, we celebrate the presence of Jesus with us now!

(5)

And as we do so the text from John 6:56 rings out - *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life”*. In other words, the bread and the cup we share each Communion Sunday feed us. They are offered to uphold, sustain and nurture us because they are the food of life – they are our assurance that eternal life begins now!

Back in 19th century Denmark an esteemed Christian philosopher, poet and social critic by the name of Soren Kierkegaard referred to a basic anxiety that affects humankind. This anxiety, Kierkegaard claimed, is related to our preoccupation with the past and to our fear of the future.

When it comes to the past there are truths from which may want to flee, there are disappointments, there are regrets, there are hurts and there things about which we may carry a sense of guilt.

When it comes to the future there are concerns over what may happen. Worst-case scenarios are often anticipated while we may recoil and shudder over the uncertainty and unpredictability of it all.

Kierkegaard claims that in all of this we actually squander the present. In a preoccupation with the past and in a fear of the future, we lose sense of the “now” and of what the “now” offers.

With an eye on the Gospel of John and Jesus’ teaching on eternal life, we are, therefore, implored to pause, to reflect and to engage with the present.



(6)

We are encouraged to consider how God is active in our world and in our lives now. We are urged to contemplate the riches of God's mercies and grace that are bestowed upon us in the present. We are called to appreciate how these things enrich us today!

For as Kierkegaard exclaims, Christ's presence is never a bygone event. And Christ's presence is not just a future expectation. At the risk of sounding a little technical and, indeed unnecessarily theological, Jesus Christ represents the "*temporalization of the eternal*." In other words, Jesus Christ is present with us now – Jesus Christ is always with us in the everyday. And this is the beginning of life – of life eternal!

As the old spiritual song goes:

"He lives, he lives.

Christ Jesus lives today!

He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.

He lives, he lives, salvation to impart!

You ask me how I know he lives?

He lives within my heart."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this second Sunday of Lent, do pause, do take the time and do reflect on this wonderful truth.

Eternal life begins now. The suffering, risen Lord is with us today and forever!

Amen.



John Barr
West Epping Uniting Church