

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The city that is to come

Presented by Bob Smith

There's a wonderful line in one of Yeats' poems that says, *'Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'* I used to remind myself of these words when my daughters were in their teens and were full of wonderful ideas that didn't fit with the sensible plans I had for them.

Most people in the second half of life think that dreams belong to youth and as we grow older we lose our capacity for them. But we never lose it completely. Deep within us there remains a sense that there is still something more; inner longings that we can't quite identify and never seem able to satisfy.

The Bible knows what those longings are. There are two verses in particular, one from the Old and one from the New Testaments that explain them. The first says, 'God has set eternity in our hearts,' and the other: 'For here we have no abiding city, but we seek the city which is to come.'

One of the great themes of the Bible is that of pilgrimage. Our present life is not a destination but a journey to a greater life. We see this theme time and again in Scripture, like the story of the Children of Israel, journeying through the desert, where God guided and provided for them until they reached their promised land; and the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, who, as the Book of Hebrews says, *"Admitted that they were... strangers on earth...they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one."* We see it also in the teaching of Jesus who says, *"In my father's house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you...that you also may be where I am."*

It's very easy for us, burdened as we are by the myriad cares and worries of daily life, to forget this great truth, and to see nothing more than the next bill we have to pay or ailment we have to endure or loved one we have to worry about. It's also easy for us to forget it because we become so absorbed in our aspirations for success in this present life and make the accumulation of things, prestige and the pursuit of pleasure the ultimate meaning in life.

I think previous generations were more aware of the transitory nature of this life than we are today. Many of the old hymns spoke of life as a journey to a promised land: hymns like *"Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land."* And those beautiful spirituals of the African slaves in America, like *"Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home."*

They belonged to generations that understood that this life, whether it brings pleasure or pain, is only transitory. We are all travelers who have a choice; either to follow the narrow path of faith, and journey deeper into the spiritual life we were created for; or to follow the broad path of self absorption that leads to spiritual death.

We often wonder why it is that we have such deep, inexpressible longings within us; longings which, in our youth, we suppose will be fulfilled if we go to live in some exotic place, or work in some exciting job, or fall in love with the girl or man of our dreams. Then we wonder why, if we are fortunate enough to achieve these

things, the longings are still there. The answer, of course, is that no location, no occupation, no romance is sufficient to meet those dreams. A piece of music, a story, a place or a romance may awaken it more deeply within us. But that longing ultimately is to be united with the one who is the source of all life and being, and to whose deeper presence we journey.

I like reading the inscriptions on tombstones. Often they speak of sadness, sometimes of futility, and sometimes of hope for something better. Some people even compose their own epitaphs. Benjamin Franklin was one of them. The epitaph he wrote for himself said this: *"The body of B. Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book its contents torn out, and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be wholly lost: for it will, as he believ'd, appear once more in a new & more perfect edition, corrected and amended by the author."*

No matter how much medical science is able to do to prolong life, and no matter how much we are able to put it out of our minds, we all know that the *'last enemy'*, as St Paul puts it, will eventually catch up with us. I remember reading an essay by novelist Emily Maguire in the Sydney Morning Herald. She described how she had stopped believing in God six years earlier, but the death of a beloved relative and the possibility of her own death overwhelmed her with grief and filled her with terror. She sought consolation in poetry, and in a few poems that spoke to *'her atheistic grief'* she found what she called *'the essence of atheistic hope:'* *'To understand that death is the end of existence and that it is inevitable, but to live as if it is not.'*

I was quite moved by her essay, especially where she wrote, *"When I say now that I would believe in an afterlife if I could, that I would take comfort in religion if I could, I mean it most sincerely."*

Well, that's not only true of Emily Maguire but also of many others, famous for their unbelief. A little over a month before he died, the philosopher and atheist Jean-Paul Sartre declared that he so strongly resisted feelings of despair that he would say to himself, *"I know I shall die in hope."* Then in profound sadness, he would add, *"But hope needs a foundation."*

His words remind me of another famous philosopher and atheist, George Bernard Shaw who, in one of the last things he wrote said: *"The science to which I pinned my faith is bankrupt; its counsels, which should have established the millennium, led, instead, directly to the suicide of Europe. I believed them once. In their name I helped to destroy the faith of millions of worshippers in the temples of a thousand creeds. And now they look at me and witness the great tragedy of an atheist who has lost his faith [in atheism]."*

The real test of someone's philosophy is whether they still express it when they reach the end and confront *the last enemy*. *'For here we have no enduring city.'*

Christianity, more than anything, is a religion of hope that teaches we are creatures of eternity for whom life is a journey, not a destination. *'For here we have no enduring city,'* the Bible says. *'But we seek the city that is to come.'*

There's a lovely poem by Wordsworth called *'Intimations of Immortality'* which says: *'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:- The soul that rises with us, our life's star,- Hath had elsewhere its setting,- And cometh from afar:- Not in entire forgetfulness,- And not in utter nakedness,- But trailing clouds of glory do we come- From God, who is our home: ... Hence in a season of calm weather - Though inland far we be, - Our souls have sight of that immortal sea...'*

It reminds me of those poignant words from the Book of Ecclesiastes, “*God has set eternity in our hearts.*” There are times when we catch fleeting glimpses of it and realise again that we are destined for something far more than the limitations of this present life. That’s why even the very best of this life never proves fully satisfying, because we were made for something bigger.

And when we fully grasp this fact, it makes us look at this life differently. It helps us look at our failures differently. Many of us have known times when everything seems to have collapsed and we feel life will never be the same again. Perhaps it won’t be the same, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be good. At the very heart of Christ’s teaching is the message that no failure has to be final. In the heart of God there is always forgiveness, and, if we sincerely avail ourselves of it, through the unseen presence of Jesus within us, there is power for a new start, no matter how many times we fall. That’s the great thing about being a pilgrim. Nothing in this life has to be final. We leave our failures behind, and in the strength that God gives, we travel on.

But this truth also makes us look at our successes differently. Sadly, pride, rather than gratitude, tends to be one of the by-products of worldly success. The Bible constantly warns against it, as in Christ’s message to the self-sufficient Laodecean Christians, ‘*You say I am rich and have acquired wealth and do not need a thing, but you don’t realise you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*’ Success, that seems so permanent, is actually very tenuous. Accident, illness, recession, even divorce can suddenly change everything. But a pilgrim travels light through this life, able to enjoy worldly success without become its slave, recognising the impermanence of it all, and knowing that the only real wealth we have is what we take with us – who and what we are inwardly.

Of all the famous characters that appear in scripture, one stands out as **the** great example of a true pilgrim – Abraham. It was he of whom the Book of Hebrews says, ‘*He admitted he was a pilgrim and traveller on earth,*’ and ‘*He looked forward to a city whose builder is God.*’ Abraham was a nomad and wherever he travelled he would set up two things; his tent and an altar. But when he moved on, the only thing that stayed was the altar.

There is great symbolism in this. The tent symbolises his earthly life, transitory, just passing through. The altar symbolises his commitment to and influence for God in this world. And the meaning is clear. When the final assessment of our lives takes place, the only thing that will mean anything is whether we’ve done the will of God. “*For here we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*”