

Vision Series 2023

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. There's probably no God, so now stop worrying and enjoy your life. That's a statement that was a slogan that was put across as an advertising.

A number of years ago now, on the side of buses all through London, mostly funded by the atheist Richard Dawkins. Not to be outdone, German atheists did a similar thing, where they put a similar statement, except they went one step further and said, there is no God, therefore stop worrying and enjoy your life.

They rented their own bus, toured the country with it. They also had a statement there of fulfilled life. And as that bus toured throughout Germany, German Christians got their own bus and put on the side of it, what if he does exist?

The thing was that they toured together throughout Germany, and often these buses were parked up overnight beside one another.

And so it was a great delight to the media in Germany to be able to take photos of this. It went throughout social media. The two opposing buses living side by side.

[1 : 29] But from that moment, our culture has been fed the message that Christianity, it's irrational and in some cases it's even immoral.

They're the underlying currents of a secular society that we are in at the moment. Things we watch on TV, read online, even hear about over coffee at work or university or those sorts of things, cause us to reject the faith, or cause many people in fact to reject the faith that they've never understood in the first place.

They pick up little statements that are plausible. And so then they reject what they don't even know in the first place. That such is the power of the new atheist movement and its popularity with little statements that are implausible in and of themselves, but have a significant influence.

In fact, these messages are so strong and frequent that many Christians, people who declare themselves to be Christian, but who have not actually thought deeply about the faith that they have, the Christian faith that they held is becoming less and less real for them in their life, in their minds, their hearts, as it appears that what they once held to is implausible.

It's not acceptable. It's not even good in our day and age. The prominent atheist Richard Dawkins, his own view is that faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and Brooks' words, to be a person of faith means that you don't think.

[3 : 26] That's his view. Now, our vision series this year is about helping us see that Christianity, that faith in Jesus Christ is...

It is good and it is, in fact, desirable. And so, if you are a sceptic sitting here amongst us or you're a sceptic tuning online in this series, I welcome you in this series.

If you have not... ..the atheistic bus, you might want to actually ask, what kind of God is it whose existence is deemed improbable?

That is, what kind of... Have you thought deep enough about that? The British bus campaign proudly informed us that the Christian God, particularly, is a God who's...

...associated with worry and a lack of enjoyment in life. What is ironic about that is that one of Dawkins' own pin-up boys himself, the atheist...

[4 : 45] ...probably the most prominent atheist of all time, once said that atheism is a long, hard, cruel business. Whereas the God of the Bible is about life.

Joy in life. See, this vision series that we're doing this year, it flows out of who we are as a church and what we seek to achieve as a church here at St. Paul's.

We treasure Jesus together for the joy of all people. That is, joy in Christ is what we want for our neighbourhood and that is to grow in God confidence.

That is totally reasonable to be a person of faith, even in this day and age. And so today I want to...
...that issue of whether it is reasonable to be Christian in this day and age, whether it's reasonable to be a person of faith in this day and age.

And I'm going to tackle that by first addressing whether it's faith is reasonable, God is reasonable, and finally, is it reasonable to have faith in Jesus Christ?

[6 : 00] So if you've got the St. Paul's app, you can take some notes on there if you like and follow along. So is faith reasonable? The St. Paul's app, discovered that there was in fact a God.

You know, you die, you discover that God exists, and you're fronted with God, what would you do? And Dr. Russell's reply was very fast, quite hubris.

He said, God, not enough evidence for you. And at the other end of the spectrum, you've got people like Elizabeth Anscombe, possibly the greatest female philosopher ever, and the greatest female philosopher that no one's ever heard of.

She looked at the... ...from atheism to Christianity. And frankly, you can come up with your own list of people, you know, the deconversion stories, and all that sort of...

You can come up with your own list of people who have gone in two different directions by looking at the same information. How do you account for the difference? The common argument that's used in our society at the moment, amongst our culture, you solve that problem by saying that religious people...

[7 : 50] ...on faith, but secular people ground their life in fact, logic, rationality, science.

Religious people have faith, they have a bias towards... ...in some way, have a bias towards religion, they have an emotional need to believe that there's something else in this world, whereas secular people are just...

They've removed all of that tradition and culture. ...people are just unbiased. Secular people are just looking at the world objectively and looking at life rationally, and they have no need to believe.

Now, the main thing I want to say about that view... ...is it's so untrue. It's so untrue.

In his book, A Secular Age, Charles Taylor calls this view the subtraction story. This is where a person might say, well, you're not the supernatural, but because of science and because of reason, I've just subtracted God.

[9 : 04] I don't need God. And now I just see the world as it actually is. Now, what happens as a shock to most non-believers is the fact that to move from belief to unbelief is simply a shift from one...

...set of beliefs. It's not a move from belief to unbelief. It's a move from this set of beliefs to this set of beliefs.

And one of the very first sets of beliefs is what is called exclusive rationality. It's the belief that science is the only arbiter of what is real and factual and that nothing should be believed unless it's proven with evidence and observation.

Now, I think science is fantastic. I mean, I'm a type 1 diabetic. 50 years ago, that was a death sentence. But because of science, it's not anymore.

And so, you look at a statement like that and you go, it sounds reasonable. And yet it's a statement that can't meet its own standards.

[10 : 36] In other words, what is the observed proof that science is the only arbiter of what is real and factual?

You can only use a circular argument. You can only use science to prove science. You can't go beyond it. And so, it's a circular argument. There's no other proof to it, to that statement.

So, in other words, it can't even stand up to its own definition. It's a long and complex.

But even reason and proof must start with faith. It must start with faith in reason and belief in some concept of proof.

For example, for the reason, rationality, depends on the faith that our senses, our ears, our eyes, our minds, our memories, are not actually tricking us.

[11 : 42] test that without using and assuming their reliability in the first place.

Observation and scientific evidence can neither prove that there is a God or prove that there is a God. All varieties of secularism are a set of beliefs.

It's a belief system. It is not simply the absence of faith. Interviewed between comedian Ricky Gervais and US comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert.

Gervais is an agnostic atheist, which means he's not sure whether he knows he is or not. Colbert is a confused Catholic.

And Gervais was explaining how in his life he's not a person of faith, he has no need for religion, no need for faith whatsoever. His whole life is based on science, on evidence, on faith, for the explanation of all things in the world.

[12:57] He made it very clear that he had no faith whatsoever. He then made a comment about how the universe, he was just talking about how the universe, Colbert asked him, so where's it all from?

He says, well, it's very simple. It all started from this freakish, minuscule burst of light, you know, what we call the Big Bang. It's this tiny, minuscule thing, this energy just boom.

And Colbert, rightly so, very quickly jumped in there and said, you can't prove that though. There's no proof for that. You are relying, very rightly so, you are relying on the theory of Stephen Hawking. And he then added that particular view that that's where it all started is a step of faith. And Gervais beautiful moment.

There was this immediate tension. It was all very humorous and they were all like engaging and friendly and lovely with one another. And there was this tension where he's like, yeah, but, and then Colbert rescued him, come in and changed the subject and moved on.

[14:18] He had to acknowledge at that point he was a person of faith. That his whole system of belief was faith. The starting point is faith in something that he can't and then they moved on to something else.

You see, theism, the existence of God, the belief in the existence of God, and atheism, the belief in the non-existence of God, cannot be 100% proven by data.

Systems of thinking and believing that need to be compared and contrasted to determine which makes the most sense.

And so, I say again, if you're a skeptic in the room or online, don't go down the line and be projecting something that you don't know. Compare and contrast.

Which makes the most sense of our experience of things that we know and things that we need to explain. Which one makes the most sense of our social experience of the problems that we face in living together and the world in which we live and which is most cohesively, logically consistent.

[15:36] So that brings me to my next point. Is faith in a God? If all people exercise faith to some degree, the Ricky Gervaises and the Stephen Hawkins and everyone in this world and myself, if we all exercise faith in this degree, is it therefore reasonable to believe in God?

To have faith in God? Believers in God have argued, this is not just Christians, this is believers in God have argued that God's existence cannot be proven empirically as if he as if this God were a physical object within the world that you can investigate.

Most religious philosophers have argued that God's existence can be logically inferred. Logically inferred. Which is exactly what he's logically inferring that this is most likely the start of the universe. It's an inference, that's all it is. Many scientific theories, especially those have to do with established on inference, not fact, inference.

Theory X is more reasonable than theory Y if it explains the data better than theory Y. It's that kind of an idea. This is not proof of the kind that can be concluded in a laboratory.

[17:11] But believers suggest that there are very significant clues that point to the existence of God. In fact, the Bible tells us that God has put his fingerprints right through the universe.

The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they reveal knowledge.

They use no words, no sound is heard from these fingerprints. And yet, their voice goes out to all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

Right throughout creation, revealing something of who God is or that there is a God. And the clues are many.

I'm going to mention just a couple. And again, really shortened version of these. There's the cosmic wonder clue.

[18:17] There is agreement that modern science is completely insufficient to explain the existence of the world. Whatever brought it about, whatever brought it about, must have been something extra natural, outside of nature, supernatural.

The existence of God is inferred from existence itself. Nothing is something. Everything must come from something that already has a being.

This means that there must be some unique being that exists and is the source of everything else. In his book, *The Language of God*, scientist Richard Collins puts it like this.

We have this very solid conclusion that the universe had an origin, the Big Bang. 15 billion years began with an unimaginably bright flash of energy from an infinitely small point.

That implies that before that, there was nothing. I cannot imagine how in this case the universe could have created itself.

[19 : 40] and the very fact that the universe had a beginning implies that someone was able to begin it. It seems to me that had to be a beginning.

Now, that particular argument, the cosmic wonder argument, the beginning of everything, is an argument that has drawn atheists in to try and explain it.

People like Stephen Hawking, you're left with people like Richard Dawkins and others who have come up with this concept of the multiple universes. In other words, to explain God away, they've come up with a theory that has got no evidence or proof to it at all.

massive step of faith. And they think they're not biased in it. Of course, the cosmic wonder argument is not conclusive proof for God, but it is a strong case that something beyond the natural world has brought this world into existence and which even now upholds that existence.

Another clue for God's existence has to do with the design, the fine tuned design of the world. You can think of this, imagine a bunch of dials that are all set at exactly the point it needs to be, all randomly, not connected to one another at all.

[21 : 27] This is not all on a big long dial platform, they're all randomly, not connected to one another, but all the right point in order for life to exist.

One of those dials is gravitational pull, not related to any of the other dials, but they're all at exactly the right point. And the possibility of those dials set at exactly the right spot without a purpose or without a cause is a massive leap of faith, massive leap of faith.

especially for a scientist who works on the principle, foundational principle of a scientist is the world is orderly.

It can be observed and yet their starting principle is randomness. The secular science. So here's a way to maybe illustrate that.

imagine that a man is before a firing squad, poor person, 10 crack marksmen, brilliant marksmen, to doom this poor prisoner, and they're all standing 10 metres away.

[22 : 47] These guys are that good, they can shoot something a kilometre away, but they're all standing 10 metres away. And countdown happens, bang, every single one of the misses. He's still alive, he's like, wow.

Could that have been an accident? Well, I mean, on one level, you can take each one of the guys and you separate them and you go, well, this guy coughed at the wrong time, all at exactly the same time, this guy was completely drunk, this guy momentarily blind, you know, blah, blah, blah, you know, like you could get all 10 of them and go, well, there's a logical explanation for all 10, or you could sit back and you could look at that and go, hang on a bit, something's there is someone back here behind these 10 people influencing this decision because they don't want that guy shot. There's a conspiracy. Believers in God suggest that the fine tuning of physics makes much more sense in a universe in which there is a creator and designer standing behind it all.

It's improbable that all the physical constants of the universe just happen to be perfectly tuned for life on their own.

To quote the scientist Collins again, if any one of these constants was off by even one part in a million million, the universe could not have come to the point where we see it.

[24 : 29] Matter would not have been able to coalesce, there would have been no galaxy, stars, planets, or people. to conclude it was something intended and something designed.

Is that conclusive proof? No, it's not. Because it suggests that it's more likely that a God, then there is not a God, it can't be dismissed.

Because there's not just ten guys lining up here. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga says that there are at least thirty very strong similar arguments for the existence of God.

The distinguished physician Lewis Thomas wrote, I cannot make peace with the randomness doctrine. This is an atheist. I cannot abide the notion of purposelessness and blind chance in

nature.

And yet, I do not know what to put in its place for the quieting of my mind. Now, none of these are so strong as to force belief.

[25 : 49] But they do make it completely rational to believe in the existence of God. Completely rational. In fact, these arguments suggest it's rational and takes less of a leap of faith to believe in God than to not believe in God.

Ultimately, non-belief in God is an act of faith because there is reason for the world and all that's within it with all its deep mathematical orderliness and matter itself all simply exist on its own with no source behind it at all.

So, yes, it's reasonable to be a person of faith because everyone is. Yes, it's reasonable to believe in God and lastly, is it reasonable therefore to believe in Jesus Christ which is what we want to do as a Jesus.

Now, the clues for God, all those arguments lined up, not only do not prove God's existence but at best they would, you could conclude that this is just some abstract God, nothing more than the Greek philosopher Aristotle's unmoved mover who created the world, got it moving but completely unaware that's what he did.

Christians believe that the main way that we know specifics about this God is through self-revelation. that is, we don't know God first and foremost because he has spoken.

[27 : 48] He's revealed himself. And Christians believe that he has done that decisively in the person of Jesus Christ. one is referring to Jesus when it makes that claim that Jesus himself is the final and decisive communication of God to his universe.

In the past, God could through the prophets at many times in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe.

It's the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. Hebrews 1, what we see in Hebrews is very clear, it's talking about Jesus, that this Jesus is God the son, the exact representation of God and he has now come to dwell.

And so therefore, it's not surprising that the man that Christians call Jesus Christ is the single most influential person in their life.

And his influence continues to grow today. A greater percentage of the world's population than ever before is Christian.

[29 : 21] And Christianity adds to 50,000 people a day or just under 19 million new Christians a year. And Christianity is the most equally distributed of any of the major religions.

Christian faith. That is, the Christian faith has crossed the cultural divisions of humanity and found a place in all kinds, rich and poor, east and west, all kinds across the world.

Why has Jesus had such an impact on humanity in the last 20 centuries? Jesus, the answer is by looking at his life, his words, his actions.

Jesus, you see the quality we would ordinarily consider incompatible in the same person.

Jesus combines high majesty with the greatest humility. He joins the strongest commitment to justice and astonishing mercy and grace. movements of justice in this world, very few of them, in fact, all of them have got enemies in some description, people that they want to have justice towards and those who they want to tear down.

[30 : 46] Very rarely do you see justice working together at the same time. He reveals a transcendent self-sufficiency and yet an entire trust in and a reliance upon his heavenly father.

We are surprised to see tenderness without any weakness, boldness, humility, without uncertainty, indeed accompanied by a towering confidence.

His unbending conviction, but he's completely approachable. His insistence on truth, but he's always bathed in love, without insensitivity, his integrity, without rigidity, his passion, without prejudice.

people who have pondered and read Jesus' words, his deeds, his life, have groped for good ways to explain what it is that they see.

And many have come to realise that the remarkable claims of Jesus may in fact be the only way forward. What he says about himself is true.

[31 : 53] is that his claims were so self-centred, but his character, his actions were so un-self-centred.

We never see him pompous, you never see him offended, we never see him he's approachable to the weakest and most broken, he's never moody or irritable.

there is an unsurpassed moral and spiritual beauty about the character and the team.

Houston Smith in his book *The World's Religions* says that only Buddha and Jesus so impressed their contemporaries that the contemporaries ask not just who are you but what are you?

What order of being do you belong to? What species do you represent? Only these two figures in history had characters that transcended ordinary human life to the degree that that question was necessary for them.

[33 : 15] And Buddha of the two Buddha asserted with great clarity thank you Rachel asserted with great clarity and emphasized over and over again that he was not a god that he was not an angelic being that he was not a divine being in any way.

God said to be God and continually claimed to be the God who made all things the creator of the universe.

This creates a great challenge. Jesus is one of the very few people in history who founded one of the great world religions.

I'm talking Scientology or something. I'm talking the big world religions. Millions and millions of adherences. He belongs to that very, very small group of people who had a very significant impact on him.

Because of their brilliant teaching but also because of their admirable lives and characters. The difference between Jesus and every other one of those in that category, that small category, he's the only one who claimed to be God himself.

[34 : 46] Buddha emphatically said that he was not God. And Muhammad of course would never have ever claimed to be Allah. Nor did Confucius claim to be God. Jesus is also part of a second group of people in history.

And this second group of people are the people who claim to be God. And what makes Jesus unique in this group of people, this group were never able to convince anyone but a very small select group of people, very small group of followers, that they were in fact God.

In the whole history of humanity, there is only one person who not only claimed to be God himself, but also got enormous numbers of people to believe it in his own time.

And that's Jesus Christ. So why did Jesus succeed as the only person who ever claimed deity and founded one of the great world religions, indeed the largest faith on the face of the earth.

Firstly, his life was exquisitely beautiful. It is extraordinarily difficult. I'd encourage you, I'd challenge you this even today.

[36 : 23] difficult to claim to be perfect and to be God, to be divine, and then to get people who live with you to believe that. My kids don't believe I'm God at all.

They don't believe I'm perfect at all. The other reason that Jesus was worshipped by Jews as God, that in itself is an extraordinary claim.

no Jew ever believed that God would be human. So sacrilegious. And yet many Jews worshipped him in the first century.

How did that happen? The resurrection. The historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is, and there are three basic lines of evidence that converge for the resurrection.

The first is the fact that there was an empty tomb. Historians see the empty tomb as just a given. The question is what happened to the body?

[37 : 37] The second is the testimony of the hundreds of eyewitnesses. The Apostle Paul can say in a public document about 20 years after the event, while people are still in the event, that hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people saw Jesus raised from the dead.

It's one thing about resurrection. It's another thing to start the rumour while people are still living and claiming that those people saw it.

The third has to do with the impact of the resurrection of Jesus followers. Very few marginal people that developed a confidence and a fearlessness that enabled them to spread the news of Jesus resurrected gladly throughout the Roman Empire and give their lives for them.

Some people have claimed that the disciples stole the body and hid it. you don't die for a hoax.

Something extraordinary must have happened to the disciples of the normal course.

And if we try to find an alternative explanation for the resurrection, we may in fact find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the resurrection.

[39 : 15] In Jesus Christ is a man who claimed to be God and yet who lived a life so great that he became the only person in the history of humanity to convince people that he is in fact God and he's still doing it today.

Friends, and particularly if you're a skeptic here, you can't be indifferent to that claim. You can't resolve the issue by just saying, well, he was just a great teacher.

He's able to convince people. His declarations about himself don't allow that. You can't respond that he'd ever made such great claims about himself because of the historical evidence for those claims. We can't be content with the explanation that he was deranged, that he was a fraud, because of the evident of his life on his followers.

And because of the case of the resurrection. This leaves us with the final possible explanation, namely is, that is, that he did what he claimed to have done.

[40 : 41] And as the creator of the universe, he still makes those claims on our life. Thomas, in John 14, still stands today for your life and mine.

I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. He is it, the source of life.
the truth about life, the way for life. Except through him.

As hard as it is to be a person of faith and to believe that Jesus is God, come to earth, it may in fact be just more difficult not to do so.

I want to say that it is totally reasonable to be a person of faith, to have faith in God, to have faith in Jesus Christ. And in the coming weeks, I want us to see just how relevant that faith is.