

MHCC Sermon

How do we know there is a God? Part 1

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Readings

AMOS 5:23-24 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

LUKE 16:31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

1 KINGS 19:11-13 The still small voice.

ACTS 17:16-32 - Mars Hill / Areopagus

Introduction

I have to confess it's with both some anxiety and a little excitement that I speak this morning about a journey I've been on for quite a while. It's a journey about origins, understanding, knowing, and belief, particularly through the lens of science. Over this talk, and the next, I'd like to share some reflections on some books I've read and people I've talked with, about stuff that cuts to the heart of what it means to believe in God and identify with the Christian faith.

I know I'm not alone in this, though I've sometimes felt it. I know there are others here that struggle with the same questions, and I know there has been recent interest in starting a small group around some of the big questions.

It's been good to do this talk; partly as a deadline to help me draw some threads together, but also to do my bit in supporting those of us who also struggle with the big questions, particularly given the recent attacks on religion by the so-called new atheists like Richard Dawkins; I also want to do this talk so that my reasons for faith are well-grounded and not just wishful thinking. I want to have an honest conversation that doesn't skip around the curly bits.

But before I go on there's an important caveat: I'm utterly unqualified to give this talk. I just read a lot. Some of you will quickly spot the gaps and see how I mix up my concepts, and worse! And I'm sure Michael Bell will lovingly point that out to me afterwards. All I can say is: this what a journey is. You start at the beginning, without any idea or preparation, and wind up where you least expect. I've tried really hard not to disappear up my left ventricle, but at some stage I'll probably disappoint you. Sorry. But this is also my way of being accountable, so that if I've really missed the plot, you'll be there with a guiding hand, gently pointing me to the front door.

BTW There'll be a reading list on our web site if you're interested, and more stuff in my sermon notes that I won't have time to cover today.

The big question

How do we know there is a God? When you think about it, it's a daft question. Have a look how the question changes when you change the emphasis.

1. **How** do we know there is a God?

What's the physical or psychological mechanism we use to accept God's existence? Are we talking about brains, physiology, or what?

2. How do **we** know there is a God?

Do social, cultural or tribal differences affect our thinking about or experience of God?

3. How do we **know** there is a God?

What do we mean by the word "know"? How do you "know" anything?

4. How do we know there is **a** God?

If we accept for the moment God exists, is there just the one, or are there lots of them to choose from?

5. How do we know there is a **God**?

But what do we mean by "God"? Do we mean a personal, Supreme Mind, or an impersonal force or energy field, or a God of the gaps (in other words, what we call anything we don't understand and that's really, really big)?

Each one of those questions is a PhD thesis in its own right. It's not really a very good question. But hopefully it's stirred up some thoughts.

Why should you care?

So why should you care about this question? Maybe you've already curled up and gone to sleep inside. I know not everyone cares about this stuff, maybe because you've already answered it enough, or maybe you're not interested in the topic. But if you *really* love me, you'll try to hang in there and look interested, even if you don't understand what I'm saying, because the chances are I don't either.

And just in case you think I'm being flippant, I said before I was a bit anxious about doing these talks. That's because it's really hard for me to escape my church baggage. How I remember it from my youth, is that "love" and "acceptance" were conditional, based on how well you conformed to the Baptist doctrinal checklist. The first whiff of "heresy" you'd get a visit from the elders, the second you'd be shown the door. That picture still sits with me even thirty years after leaving that world. And I'm not even sure it's all true.

Now if there's a place in the world this is unlikely to happen, it would have to be here at Mt Hawthorn Community Church. I'm assuming your love for me is bigger than my theological boxes. But I'm not taking anything for granted.

The plan

I was originally just going to talk about the juicy stuff, like whether belief in God is reasonable, particularly in the light of the big bang, evolution, natural selection, and so on. But as I've gone on this journey, I've noticed how hard it is to be an observer without becoming part of the experiment. We've all got so much personal and social baggage. So it's not surprising when we discuss the big questions that what we usually get is a lot of heat, but not much light. How would you feel being put under the spotlight with questions that challenge your most basic world views?

Well, actually, that's just what I want to do, but hopefully in a way that's interesting and non-threatening. But one thing I want to make really clear: I'm not here to change minds or persuade; I'm just exploring. Personally, my aim is to figure out what the right questions are. I'm confident that you're all very wise and discerning, and will tell me when I'm talking out of my hat.

OK, I want to touch on some things I've really struggled with, particularly the criticism from Dawkins that belief in God is irrational or, at best, a convenient fiction. Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist who's written a number of best-selling books challenging belief in God. He's one of a group of popular authors that includes the late Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennet, who see themselves as missionaries for atheism in the new age, particularly in response to the carnage of the twin towers wrought by Islamic extremism.

If I was going to answer their criticisms with integrity, I needed to not just react out of old patterns, but take at face value the proposition that what we call signs of the Kingdom might just be an evolutionary response, a coping mechanism for surviving the world.

And at the same time, I felt strongly there was more to be learned about things that got in the way of tackling difficult questions with honesty and openness. There were two or three areas in particular that presented themselves: the role of belief, the ways reinforce those beliefs with certain behaviours, and the effect of Christian fundamentalism in shutting down real conversation. I'll only have time to talk to a couple of those.

Belief

Watching some online debates between Dawkins and various Christian thinkers, I was appalled by the patronising way Dawkins treated his opponents, and his straw man caricatures of Christian belief; it was like watching a child pull the wings off flies. But I also noticed some similarly dismissive attitudes towards Dawkins, exemplified in a recent Q & A debate between Dawkins and Cardinal Pell, each with their own cheer squads on hand. It was such a lost opportunity. Their worldviews were so alien to each other they seemed to be completely unable to hear each other with grace or understanding.

There's no better example of this than the climate change debate, on which Pell is himself a sceptic. Wilson da Silva, in *Cosmos* magazine in July 2012, in an article called "*Just facts ain't enough, ma'am*", said this:

- "...Ideas are more powerful than facts, especially ideas that conform to your world view.... You cannot engage in debate with climate change contrarians or creationists without encountering a dogged intransigence to logical arguments backed by overwhelming data."
- "...people don't assimilate facts in a vacuum; they filter them through their pre-existing belief system. Psychologists call this 'motivated reasoning': the tendency to seek out evidence that conforms to our views. "We seek facts that confirm what we already believe, and reject the ones that contradict our worldview."

So our beliefs have the capacity to prevent open and honest discussion.

Now some of you will have noticed Da Silva's comment about creationists, which incidentally I happen to agree with. So before anyone takes offence, let me say a couple of things: a) I'm Italian, so I get excited about stuff, and b) if I say something rude and dismissive about creationism or anything else, it's not personal.

We are not defined by our beliefs. We are who we are. God holds us in the palm of his hand, whatever our beliefs. And if you or I turn out to be wrong, we're not going to disappear in a puff of smoke. We can still be friends. We can talk about stuff, and change our minds if we want, and it will be OK.

Well, that's the theory. In reality, people's sense of identify is often tightly bound up with what they say they believe. So when someone challenges that belief it can be really hard not to take it personally.

But what exactly do we mean by the word belief? Here's a simple working definition, so you at least know what I mean. A belief is something we assert about how the world works, or some part of it. We might base that belief on our own experience and understanding, or the experience and understanding of others we trust. It's our way of saying "Yep, this is how this part of reality works" For example: I believe there is a God. I believe each of us has an angel looking after us. I believe the destruction of the twin towers was part of a global conspiracy. I believe climate change is crap. I believe that boat arrivals are illegal should jump to the back of the queue.

So our beliefs affect how we think and act, sometimes without us even being aware of it. But the thing is, we usually hold these beliefs even when don't have all the facts, or sometimes without any facts at all. And most of the time, that's actually OK. Our beliefs usually serve us well enough to get by in the world.

But there's another function of belief. Beliefs give us certainty and predictability in the absence of all the facts. And when you think about it, it's just as well, or the world would be a scary place to live in.

But because we don't have all the facts, beliefs, however well grounded, can only ever be approximations of reality, based on the filter of our own or other's experience and understanding. If you think about all the potential biases that could exist, there's one really important conclusion we need to draw: *We could be wrong!* There, it's taken me fifteen minutes to come to the same point Peter Oliver does in five seconds.

In theory, when new facts present themselves, we should modify our beliefs accordingly. But in practice that doesn't often happen. That's why it can be so hard to talk about some subjects respectfully, because it can feel like the rug is being pulled from under you. For some people, the possibility they might be wrong doesn't even occur to them, and if it did it could be totally destabilising.

One final point I've already alluded to: many of our beliefs aren't actually our own; we take them on trust. In medicine, particle physics, psychology and so on we routinely acknowledge and trust trained specialists. We can't all be experts. Otherwise we would be in chaos.

And our religious beliefs are no exception. We often rely on commentaries, teachers, theologians, pastors, tradition. And it's usually the case that agreement with traditional beliefs is a condition of membership within a religious community.

We also take on familial beliefs, though we're not always aware of it. As a normal part of growing up we generally accept our parent's view of the world, until we've had enough experience to form our own opinions. But there are many times when that doesn't happen and we continue with the same familial beliefs we always had.

All of this leads me to suggest that we should tread very lightly when we spout off about what we believe. Though our beliefs serve us well in many areas of life, our capacity for self-deception is immense. To repeat Peter, we could be wrong. And, for some of us, this is really hard to accept, because we just don't deal well with uncertainty. Fear and uncertainty are powerful drivers that determine far more of our beliefs and behaviours than we give credit for.

Proofs of God's activity

One area that follows on directly from belief is behaviour. In many ways our beliefs determine our behaviours. As Jesus said, what goes into a person's heart determines what comes out.

But I was thinking about some of the criticisms Dawkins and others have made about religious behaviour, particularly that behaviour can in return, influence belief, so that we have a self-reinforcing system that is not necessarily grounded in reality. The more I thought about this, the more I wondered what behaviours might reinforce our belief in God.

Signs and wonders

For example, signs and wonders, "miracles", healing, speaking in tongues, interpretation. These are behaviours we would particularly see in Pentecostal and charismatic churches that derive from their doctrine of the Holy Spirit. But I've also seen their practice used as signs that God must be there or we wouldn't be doing these weird things.

But the same questions can be raised about the less spectacular stuff we do in mainline churches. Whether it's singing, praying, preaching, comforting, men's bible studies, homemakers (don't you

love those old terms) we often think we're special, or somehow unique, and that's an evidence of God's presence.

Jacques Ellul was French philosopher and sociologist, who wrote *False Presence of the Kingdom* in 1963. Observing the church from a sociological perspective, he noted that on almost every metric Christians behave the same way as everyone else. 90% of church is drawn from people with an earlier church background, just the same as in political or other social groups. In other words, where you are born and what your family history is are primary determinants of your church experience. And most of you would be aware of many other metrics such as marriage, divorce, mental health, Christians by and large reflect the same group statistics as anyone else.

And the point is? Well, to the extent our confidence in God rests on the "uniqueness" of what happens in church, we may well be disappointed. The things we do, as an outworking of our various beliefs, are not in themselves necessarily evidence of God's activity. You already know this, and God has said so himself. Think about Isaiah 58, or the Amos passage we read earlier.

Creating meaning

Another thing that can get in the way of hearing clearly and honestly is a cultural tendency to infuse events with meaning and purpose: for example, "God made this happen", "God said such and such to me", or "God caused that brick to fall off that wall onto his head because he's a complete twat." Now I don't want to diminish God's presence that each of us feels. But some Christian subcultures seem to take this to an extreme, where almost any event can be imbued with God's purpose.

The real problem I have with this way of seeing things, is that we may be guilty of projecting our own desires or beliefs onto God, putting words into his mouth. At its worst, it enables individuals to project authority and understanding onto other people on the basis of personality but without any evidence. I had a taste of this when I was initially diagnosed with lymphoma. I heard the view more than once that God had allowed, or caused, this cancer to teach me something. The thought that this cancer might actually be meaningless is unbearable for some people. For them it implies God is not in control of everything. What it implies for me is that it's us who are not in control.

The point I'm making here is that we sometimes try to create certainty by creating meaning, and in so doing manufacture God's presence or activity. So when something inconvenient comes along that conflicts with our view of God, we can more easily rationalise it away by asserting some opinion of what God thinks or says. Think about how some Christians dealt with September 11th, or AIDS.

Fundamentalism

Before I move back to my journey, I need to reluctantly saying something about fundamentalism. Reluctant because, on the one hand it's too convenient a pigeonhole, but on the other it's a term that describes a movement that is, in my view, driven largely by fear, insecurity and the need to control. And this gets in the way of asking tough questions.

Christians fundamentalism is actually a recent concept that came about in the early 20th century when some American Christians drew up a checklist of fundamentals that you had to agree to, to get into heaven, largely as a reaction to modernist theology. In that sense both fundamentalist Christians and atheists are similar, because both have a distinct line they draw in the sand that you can't cross over. This ain't much mystery for a fundamentalist.

Christian fundamentalists tend to adhere to an interpretation of the Bible that includes beliefs such as Creationism, biblical inerrancy and premillennialism. And this creates incredible difficulty in dealing with difficult and complex issues such as homosexuality, violence in the bible, and natural selection. In fact they effectively shut conversation down so that any student of science or justice is effectively forced to either abandon their faith or abandon rationality.

But scientists can behave like fundamentalists too, and Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens are prime examples. They have a checklist you adhere to just like the Christians, and the first item is: there is no God.

Sadly, the two big casualties of fundamentalism are love, and mystery.

So where were we?

You might remember from my last sermon a few years ago, which Mark Bovill refers to as my Star Wars sermon, I grappled with some difficult Old and New Testament passages that seemed to paint God as violent and vengeful, and at odds with Jesus' teaching. I suggested:

- Perhaps we could adopt a more bottom-up view on inspiration and authority, that sees Scripture as a gritty product of humans struggling in their understanding of faith, with God's inspiration interweaved throughout its pages. Surprisingly, I didn't get shot down for that.
- Seeing Jesus as the lens or benchmark through which we interpret the rest of Scripture, and parking to one side those things that don't seem to fit. And since then we've had other speakers, like Michael Hardin, saying the same thing.

You might also remember I finished that day with a checklist, just to keep my ghosts happy. There's no checklist today.

As I look back to that sermon, I realise I'd been putting off some tough questions for years. So in the months that followed, I decided to pay more attention to my journey, to see if I was treading in a path that was no longer the right one for me.

Some other problems

But again, baggage made it hard to do that and left me with some dilemmas.

Fear of hurting people

One of the consequences of revisiting those Biblical passages was a re-appraisal of how I read Scripture. I'm well aware that I've been on a gradual process of rethinking my position on scriptural interpretation, and I'm certainly not the first person here to do that. We're probably aware of the existential crisis bible students face when things they thought were black and white, like biblical authorship and authenticity, aren't. So when I've asked "Why don't we hear sermons of your struggles more often?", the usual answer is "because we have a responsibility not to undermine people's faith, or cause them unnecessary distress."

But I'm not sure that would actually be the case. As we've just heard, people don't change their beliefs easily anyway. And what does that attitude say about the God of truth who reveals himself into people's hearts through his Spirit? Does it say more about the self-selection of ideas that Da Silva talked about, that we subtly protect ourselves from places we don't want to go? What does it say about our courage to face the mystery of our relationship with God?

Worship and devotion

Worship and devotion are central to celebrating faith. The Bible encourages us to sing, pray, meditate, study. Worship and devotion create a space for comfort and encouragement in a tough world. They are probably our most powerful tools for drilling through our facades. And from a creative perspective, it's a fundamental part of how I live my faith.

But at the same time, it really hard for me to be singing songs of how much I love God one minute, and then engaging in a polite discussion about whether he/she exists the next.

A conflict of interest

So, in a sense, I have a conflict of interest. I can't easily ask some questions, because it's hard to stand at arms length from something I'm emotionally invested in. I wonder if theologians have a similar difficulty.

In the scientific world you accept that you don't know everything, and if new information comes along that stands things on their head, so be it. Some ruffled egos, maybe, but generally excitement at new understandings. But it doesn't work like that with religion, because faith and practice are so heavily invested in the status quo.

When you have a revealed truth such as through the bible or the Koran, while we can interpret within certain boundaries, nobody can add or subtract to the basic revelation. This restriction is even more of a problem for traditions that aren't story-based. There's no wriggle room. You've got no-where to go.

So reconciling traditional biblical views on issues such as violence and sexuality with what we know today becomes really difficult. And it has the effect of polarising the conversation into arch-conservatives versus whacky liberals. Are these really the only alternatives? The problem is, when we free scripture from those traditional interpretations, how do we know where to stop? How do we avoid accepting just the bits we like? How do we avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater? I don't have an answer to these questions.

A scientific approach

So back to my story. A couple of years before my sermon, I'd read a couple of books my son Andrew gave me, bless him. One was *The "God" Part of the Brain* by Matthew Alper, which explains belief and morality in terms of successful evolutionary strategies, and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, who argues along similar lines but takes a far more aggressive swipe at religion. Both these books had a profound effect on me. For a start, there was a lot in both books I agreed with. So many of our beliefs are just not supported by scientific observation. For example, there's a good reason why the universe looks really, really, really old - because it is!

Yet at the same I was surprised by a) their utterly inadequate explanation of simple things like love and their blatantly biased approach. For example, if the capacity to believe in God seems to be hardwired in people from all cultures, couldn't it possibly be that's because there actually is a God rather than being the result of natural selection?

For thirty years I've worked in a science-based agency. And in that time I've learnt something about the scientific method and how good it is at adding to knowledge and developing better explanations as new information comes along. So much of our way of living relies on science. To dismiss science is to ignore the car we drive and the light switch we turn on.

Despite the emotive debate around climate change, the scientific method provides probably the best tool we have for systematically confirming whether change exists. But one of the most discouraging things I've witnessed is the way, in the face of near-unanimity from scientists across the planet, people will still seek out denialists and denigrate or physically threaten the scientists.

In some ways, we shouldn't be surprised. Even if someone were to rise from the dead, there would still be people who'd choose to look the other way.

But here's the rub: what if there was something in what Dawkin's said? How could I avoid the same bias that I accused Dawkins of? I remember asking Michael Bell a couple of years ago, "Is it possible to put aside the fact I'm a Christian and ask, at arms-length, "What is the best way of making sense of the world?" I talked about this with Mark Newhouse and Michael Prince too. As you'd expect I heard a variety of views. But it helped clarify some things: a) it is pointless to look for answers unless you know the right questions, and b) it is pointless asking a question if you don't want to know the answer.

The only way I found to deal with that bias was to try and be aware of my baggage, as much as humanly possible. And as I read material that contradicted the traditional views, I committed myself to reading with an open mind, to listen to the voices that instinctively tried to shut down the conversation. The more I did this, the more I became aware of how powerful those voices were.

That process led me to the following thoughts, which I admit do sound faintly naïve: Could we use the scientific toolkit to ask questions about God? What would be the limitations? What about myself would I need to be aware of? How far could that approach take me along the journey of faith?

Well, I should have taken out shares in the Book Depository. (Thanks for the tip, Lindy!) And you know, the more I've read, the more I think scientists are just as guilty of presupposition and bias as anyone else. Surprise, surprise. There is a palpable, almost hysterical, sense of "Give me any explanation but God". Nevertheless I've read some really interesting books. And while I'll talk more about this next time, the kinds of questions that really excite me include:

- Has matter always existed?
- Why does anything exist?
- How did life begin?
- Is there a moral code that sits above all religions?
- Is God just a God of the gaps?
- If there is a God, what can we say about that God just from observation?

I've been trying to ask these questions without going anywhere, staying where I am, sitting in the moment with the God I understand through Jesus. Keeping the baby with the bathwater until I have a better idea of which is which.

About knowing

And how do you know which is which? One of the first things you learn in the science versus theology debates is that when a scientist says they "know" something, they usually mean something quite different to when a Christian says it.

For example, suppose you're trying to explain why a person reacts to a particular food. A scientist will design an experiment with lots of people and lots of foods, and some controls. If they do design the experiment well, they'll generally be able to determine what the causal relationships are, if any. They'll be glad to show you their data and their results, so that anyone else can repeat the experiment. And if they've covered enough bases and their peers have endorsed their methodology, only then will they say, "I *know* how this works, but only in this particular situation, with these caveats". And if someone else were to provide new data, or come up with a different explanation, they'd all get really excited because they've just added to knowledge. That's the scientific method. It's brilliant!

But ask them to devise an experiment to prove the existence of God (or their own existence for that matter) and they won't be able to. Because you can't prove God is there and you certainly can't prove he isn't there. Ask a scientist to explain why anything exists and they run for cover.

That's because, while they're are pretty good at explaining "how" something works, they don't, as a rule, deal with "why". Because "why" involves purpose and intention, and if their starting point is that there is only matter, then there is no "why", because matter is not conscious. Except us.

And yet, if that was the only kind of knowledge we used to make sense of the world, we would completely miss what it means to be a human being. There is a whole other knowledge that we use every minute of the day. Think of this: we think, we're conscious and we're self-aware. We have purpose and intention, we love, we laugh, we cry, we pray, we interact, we sing, we paint, we write, we know about right and wrong. We are all connected from the cellular to the social level in more ways than we can possibly know. And yet science still has little understanding of the very things that make us human.

Without love and art, life is not be worth living. There is a whole other way of knowing that takes in the how and then asks, why? This is the realm of personal experience. It develops from our growing up through to when we die. It's a knowledge that makes us want to find like-minded people to share in the mystery. And over time, we develop a body of knowledge on why the world is the way it is. Though, if you asked us to prove it, we wouldn't be able to. We would just know it to be true.

Conclusion

In the next sermon I'm going to describe more of my journey, and some of the conclusions I've reached in the process. I don't want to give too many spoilers, but let me say this:

I've spent the last few years effectively deconstructing my faith. Why? Because I want the truth. I don't want the status quo because it's safer, or more convenient. Christianity is about seeking and finding the truth. And if we are truly seeking God with our hearts and minds, we do no-one any favours by protecting ourselves from that which we fear the most - that we might have got it all wrong. If God really is who he says he is, then he will be found by those that seek him with an open heart.

And you might think, given what I've said that so much of Christian belief and behaviour is not unique or special or magical, that I now think the whole lot is just wishful thinking. Well you'd be wrong. If I thought that I wouldn't be here.

It's true that I think human response to fear and uncertainty undoubtedly create a lot padding. But I still think, without a shred of doubt, there is a signal. An "other". A still, small voice that sometimes we can only just hear through the noise. That's why I'm still here. That's why we're still here. Not because of all this stuff we do together - but because we've all heard the voice, and we'll do whatever it takes to hear it again and nurture it. That's part of the joy of journeying together. We are co-travellers. We all know something is going on. We all know there is a mystery. We all know there is something much deeper.

And what's more we're not alone. Many of us today have chosen to explore this mystery here, in this place, with this tradition, through the lens of Jesus in history. This is a choice we make and the risk we take is that we could be wrong. I'm continuing to choose here, not because it's the best way, but because, in my heart of hearts, I don't think I'll find it easier anywhere elsewhere. I'd prefer to stumble around with the people I love and who've earned the right to tell me when I'm full of it, so long as they can handle the awkward questions.

Any questions?

Reading list

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* - my picks