

DOES GOD EXIST

Psalm 14

The Sermon title today is “Does God Exist”. Well, in my view, the answer to that question is clear – of course he does. So, perhaps I should sit down and we can all go home early then? Well actually no! I think there are lots of important, even vital, things to say on this subject.

What scripture has to say about the existence of God is well summarised in the opening of the first verse of our reading from Psalm 14:

“The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." ” (Psalm 14:1 NIV)

The foolish are arrogant, they imagine that they can explain things without God and manage their lives without him. One major reason they don't want to believe in God is because they'd then have to believe in a judge and ask forgiveness for their sins. That's the last thing they want.

Really, only a fool could say that God doesn't exist. Calvin said that a knowledge of God is available to all through nature. To some extent we all know deep inside ourselves that God exists, but some of us just don't want to admit it. In fact we often refer to the world around us as creation, we instinctively recognise that the world didn't arise by accident – it was created. As those of you who've attended my Teaching Days on “The Scientific Evidence for God” will know, the evidence for the existence of a creator designer God is overwhelming. The sheer improbability of either the universe coming into existence by chance, or of life arising within that universe if it did somehow exist are so great that you would have better chances of winning the UK National Lottery every single week for 10 years if you only bought a single ticket each week than of either of those things happening by chance.

The first chapter of the book of Genesis teaches us that the universe was created at a particular moment in the past. Scientists used to ignore the idea of the creation of the universe. They believed it had always existed. In fact it wasn't until the mid 1960's when two scientists Penzias and Wilson discovered the evidence for a Big Bang origin of the universe in the shape of the radiation left over from that cataclysmic event that most scientists accepted that the universe did indeed have an origin. In fact we now think that the origin of the universe was very like the description of Genesis chapter 1 and verse 3:

“And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3 NIV)

scientists now believe that the origin of the universe was so hot that initially nothing could exist but photons, which are light.

The chances of the universe being such as to permit us to be here this morning to talk about it are so small that this alone tells us that there was a creator designer. There are actually dozens of apparently independent factors which all point to the need for a creator designer. The strength of gravity, the strength of the nuclear forces, the cosmological constant all have to have precise values to better than one part in a million, million or better. This morning I've only time to briefly look at one of them – the strength of the force of gravity. If gravity had been too strong the universe would already have recollapsed and if it had been too weak matter wouldn't have condensed to make galaxies, stars and us. If we imagine the possible range of the strength of gravity is represented by a ruler 100 million km long (most of the way from here to the sun), then if we moved the strength of gravity on that ruler by the thickness of a human hair, life in our universe would no longer be possible. That couldn't have happened by chance.

And even if the universe did somehow manage to exist with just the right values, the origin of life within it is so unlikely that this alone requires us to believe in a creator designer. There are many issues here, but again for reasons of time I'm just going to focus on one of them this morning – DNA. DNA is an essential part of every cell in

your body and it's an essential element of enabling those cells to function. It's just like a computer programme, it's pure information which tells cells how to make proteins. Well, there's only one thing which can cause information to come into existence and that's an intelligent mind. Hence the need for a creator in the origin of life.

This morning I don't have the time to go into these issues in any detail, but those of you who want to know more can come and talk to me after the service or indeed anytime, or you can download the notes of my Teaching Day on the Scientific Evidence for God from my website. Let me just stress that these are not arguments from ignorance, a so called "God of the gaps" approach – God standing in for our ignorance, the gaps in our knowledge and understanding. A creator designer is logically the best explanation of all the evidence.

So far we've arrived at good evidence for the existence of a god, but not necessarily the personal Christian God. Our God, The Lord, not only exists, he lives and is active. That's one of the simplest and yet most profound things we can say about him. As scripture says, pagan gods have "no breath in them" (Jeremiah 10:14) and there is no other God but the one living God (Deuteronomy 4:35). Our God alone is God and there is none like him (Exodus 8:10).

So how can we show that this living personal God – our Christian God – exists. Well, apart from the evidence of creation itself, God has come into his universe and made himself known to us. He's done that by revealing himself to us through his word – the scriptures – and also by the things he has done within our universe. Clearly he couldn't have done either of those things unless he actually existed and the scriptures tell us about what kind of a God he is.

Again there's lot's of evidence as to why we should have confidence in the scriptures, but I'm not going to focus on that this morning. Any of you who are in doubt about that issue can come and talk to me or Giles or download the notes of my Teaching Day "an Overview of the Bible" from my website.

What I do want to focus on this morning is the most important thing Our God has done in his universe – the sending of his son Christ to die for our sins. From now on when I speak of God I'm going to be referring to our Christian God. The whole of our Christian faith rests on the historical reality that Christ was actually born into our universe on a particular day in history, that he lived in this world for some 40 years and that on a particular day in history – I believe in 33 AD, but it might have been in 30 AD – he was crucified on a Roman cross and three days later he was raised to life again. If that intervention of God in our universe isn't a reality then the whole of our Christian faith isn't true. Christianity is the only faith which is based on real historical realities, events which happened on particular days in history.

Well, we know that Jesus did exist and that he was crucified in the first century AD. Apart from the scriptures lots of secular historians and Jewish records testify to that. Historians like Josephus, Tacitus, Julius Africanus, the Jewish Talmud and other secular sources plus various non-scriptural Christian writers all testify to Jesus' existence and crucifixion – and of course, we shouldn't ignore the testimony of the gospels which are all eyewitness accounts. If you don't believe that Jesus lived and was crucified early in the first century AD then you shouldn't believe that the emperor Nero or any other major historical figure existed either.

Many people say to me, yes but the fact that Jesus lived and was crucified doesn't prove that he was the Son of God. Well many of the historical sources I've just mentioned, secular as well as Christian, refer to Jesus' miracles – but the strongest evidence is Jesus' resurrection – surely no one other than God could have raised Jesus from the dead. The Christian church has never preached the resurrection of Jesus as a spiritual event or a philosophical abstraction, but rather as a physical fact that occurred on a particular day in history nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus in fact made a large number of appearances after his resurrection that are recorded in the Gospels and other NT writings, not only to the disciples but, one recorded occasion to more than 500 people.

Let me just read to you what Paul says in chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” (1Corinthians 15:3-8 NIV)

Now Paul wrote that letter no later than 55 AD, around 20 years after the crucifixion, and so well within the lifetimes of many eyewitnesses to the events he’s talking about. Indeed Paul claims many of them are still alive as he writes. If the resurrection had never taken place then plenty of people would have come forward to contradict the early Christian writings – but no one did. Additionally the Jewish authorities would have had every reason to produce his dead body, but they never did. I think these two things are very significant. The early Christian church would never have grown and spread as it did if it’s claims could have been shown to be false by bystanders, officials and opponents who had heard Jesus, seen his actions and watched him die. In chapter 26 of the book of Acts Luke says that Paul told King Agrippa that the facts about Jesus were public knowledge (Acts 26:26). If the NT statements about Jesus were not true then Christianity would never have got off the ground.

Another piece of very significant evidence is the change in the behaviour of the disciples and Jesus’ family. The sudden courage displayed by Peter and the other disciples in proclaiming the “Good News” of the gospel message, as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts can only be explained on the basis that they underwent a real life changing experience the truth of which was absolutely convincing to them. They braved arrest (Acts 5:18), flogging (Acts 5:40) and even death (Acts 7:58). What a transformation from the band of men who

had cravenly fled at Jesus' arrest and had not even dared to attend his crucifixion. Surely it's also significant that Jesus' half brothers became followers and believers after the resurrection, especially James who became a leader in the Jerusalem church. Before Jesus' crucifixion his family had thought he was mad. Only a really major event could have produced such dramatic changes in so many men at the same time. Clearly this event was connected with Jesus, since they were all moved to proclaim the gospel. So, what could that event have been other than the resurrection of Jesus?

Again we can't simply say that the disciples didn't behave like that. The rapid spread of the Christian faith to all corners of the Roman Empire is evidence that the disciples were preaching the gospel strongly and widely.

People often say to me, why doesn't God send Jesus back again so that I can see him – then I would believe. Well actually they wouldn't. Thousand of people saw Jesus during his ministry on earth and didn't believe in him and those whose minds are closed wouldn't believe if they saw him now. Luke records that Jesus told a parable about a rich man who had died, was consigned to Hell, and asked to be allowed to send a messenger to this world so as to warn his brothers and he was told that:

“.....‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Luke 16:31 NIV).

Other people say to me I'd like to believe, but I've got lots of questions and doubts. Well I've got lots of questions too, things like the nature of the Trinity, although I don't have any doubts or questions about the basic gospel message. Only a fool would expect, or even want all mystery to be resolved and to understand everything about an infinite God with our puny finite minds. I certainly wouldn't want to worship a God I could fully understand. But, as I study the scriptures I come to understand him more and more. Read your Bibles, God's instruction manual. Do you know what the word Bible

stands for? Well someone said it's Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth – we need to read those instructions.

Even though we can't fully understand, if we choose to look for it, there's lots of evidence for the existence of God and the truth of scripture. In fact, I don't think that anyone who takes the time to examine the evidence thoroughly, fairly and honestly could fail, on the balance of probabilities, to be convinced of the existence of God and of the incarnation, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. But, we want to write God off because we want to be in control, because if we accept God then He's in control.

Apart from the objective evidence we can also experience God through Christ for ourselves, which is perhaps even more convincing. A person with experience is not at the mercy of a person with an argument. As Christ himself said if we have seen him then we've seen the Father – Jesus is just God with skin on. I know that God is real not only because of the evidence but through my experience of his transforming effect in my life.

When we relate to God we can choose either to believe in him and move towards him or to reject him and move away from him – the choice is yours. But do think about it carefully. It's the most important choice you'll ever have to make in your lives, because it has eternal consequences as the rich man in the parable I mentioned earlier discovered too late. We have to make a choice during our time here on earth, so let us not leave it too late to turn to God and believe in him and his son Jesus Christ – we don't want to find ourselves next to the rich man in the parable.