St Paul's Cathedral
Together transforming our City and Diocese

SERMON

Sunday 30 August, 2020
A sermon preached by The Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames for Science Week 2020.

Science Week at the Cathedral does three things.
Firstly, it conducts a Q/A for senior secondary students before an eminent panel of scientific and philosophical experts, all engaging the theme for national science week during the current year and two theological experts pointing out issues to do with faith and science in the questions and the answers offered.

Last year we had the Q/A at The Academy of Mary Immaculate with a large hall full of students. This year we were well on the way with Wesley College to have the Q/A at Wesley. Alas, because of Covid19 we had to cancel the event. But for next year it will be on again at Wesley.

The second thing Science Week at the Cathedral does is Science Week in Parishes. A group of us prepare modules for use in parishes in or around National Science Week responding to the theme of national science week. This is our purpose:

> ***In an increasingly global and secular scientific culture, saturated with technology and the market, the science–faith conversation is at the cutting edge of Christian engagement.***
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> ***Our purpose is firstly to help equip Christians for that engagement and secondly to open up the science-faith conversation for as many people as possible.***

Thirdly, we have someone who preaches here at the Cathedral in or around Science Week addressing this purpose. That is what I am about this morning by telling two stories.

One is a story from my teaching *God and the Natural Sciences*, a second-year subject at the University of Melbourne, which I co-lecture with my atheist colleague Dr Kristian Camilleri.
The second story comes from Your ABC, from the show called *Acceleration*, 9.30pm on Tuesday nights.

Here is the first story. A bright young man deeply committed to the physical sciences and to mathematics was clearly atheist and not interested in theology. Though he vigorously pursued maths and sciences he nevertheless came to God and the Natural Sciences. ur. All this was

consistently displayed for a number of weeks until the following point was made by my colleague and I. We said,

“The question ‘why is there anything at all?’ is not a question that the sciences can answer.”

This student commented, “you mean science hasn’t yet got an answer.” I explained that we were not saying that because that would be what’s called a ‘gaps argument’. At the point where there is a gap in our scientific knowledge many people have popped God into the gap as a ‘stop gap’ answer – what else could it be?! Of course, as scientific knowledge expands the gap closes and there is no need to refer to that ‘stopgap’ God anymore. Newton did this when he said that only by God intervening to stabilise the planets orbiting the sun could the solar system remain stable. This was because he could not show scientifically that the system was stable. At the end of the 18c Pierre Laplace using the well-known laws of physics – thank you Newton – showed using some brilliant mathematics how the universe was a stable system. No need for Newton’s ‘stopgap’ view of God.

We repeated our point to the student. “The question ‘why is there anything at all?’ is not a question that the sciences can answer.” The reason is that scientific answers all assume the existence of whatever it is that does the explaining.

But if we are asking why there is anything at all, a scientific answer won’t help because it assumes the existence of things, yet we are asking why anything exists. You could see that this caught his attention. He repeated a couple of times. Not because it is a hard thought because he never had thought before. His education had given him the idea that the sciences will explain everything. You could see from his nodding and smiling that he grasped both the question and if there was an answer, he would not have to give up any of his science and maths to pursue it wherever it might lead but that these would never answer the question.

So here was this student standing before a door that had opened in his understanding.

My second story comes from watching a programme on Your ABC called The Great Acceleration. This week was all about artificial intelligence. The previous week showed all the advances in science and technology over the last fifty years to do with cosmology, astronomy, and the exploration of the solar system. One emphasis is the acceleration of our knowledge and our knowhow

The first episode ends with a senior particle physicist saying that the question that intrigues him the most is simply “why are we here?”. Amazing. This was a change of gears. It seems that all his scientific work and knowledge still left him intrigued by this question.

If I had to guess how this came about it would be because while the whole scientific story of the universe is of course incomplete, even so it is remarkably intelligible in so many ways that we are continually led to find new surprises about our universe and our capacity to know it. Our consciousness leaps towards the possibility of full intelligibility, leading us to ask, "why are we here?" or "why is there anything at all?"

I connect the two stories because the intrigue of the particle physicist would be increased as he like the young student realized that all his excellent scientific knowledge, while it might prompt his question, was not going to answer his question, no matter how much more scientific knowledge expanded as it will, wonderfully.

Now many people think that these questions have no answer. The universe just is. It is a brute fact. There is no answer and strictly there is no real question about why we are here, or why is there anything at all. This has become deeply taken for granted. I won't say any more about that response here, though there is more to say, especially why I think that road is mistaken. Another time.

My two stories are about two people into physics and maths who are engaged by the question "why are we here?" and "why is there anything at all?" I am assuming these questions have come home to you from your own experience even if you haven't done any science or mathematics. For example, it may come to you through the stories like Heather showed us last week from the people from St Paul's enjoying their gardens, or it may come though the poem by Jenny that Heather read, or the delight of people with their grand children as we hear from Jamie, David, Joan and Jenny and sometimes from me as well.

This open door in our understanding feeds wonder, which I think is important. Firstly, because it draws our heart and mind to a new level of attention and of questions. Secondly, because wonder can so easily be lost in the rush, the drama, the overstimulation, and the threats of life today.

On that point let me quote Einstein, who said,

The Intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.

In various ways we can all be standing before an open door in our understanding, resonating with the sense of intrigue and wonder and the pleasure that can accompany the question, "why is there anything at all?", "why are we here?"

One answer would be something, whatever it may be, that sustains the whole universe in existence, something beyond our universe, something that transcends our universe.

An analogy might be the music played on say a clarinet or a violin, that exists so long as it is being played. On this analogy, the universe would be the music being played and we are part of that music. And we have just opened up to the question of why is there any music at all and who or what is playing the music?

Traditionally this transcendent reality is called 'God' who is the cause of all causes and if so, there is nothing that creates God.

In a couple of moments, we will say together the Nicene Creed where we give the Christian account of the God who answers the question, "why is there anything at all?", and "why are we here?"

Before we go to the Creed let me invite you to engage the science-faith conversation as you watch this 3.5minute clip about the universe, courtesy of BuzzFeed:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIbfYsQfNWs

Mind boggling isn't it. In response, how might you enter the science-faith conversation? Perhaps as a 'pub test' with mates, or as happened to one of our 8am congregation, as happened while getting her hair cut, when she mentioned the Cathedral. The young hairdresser exclaimed, "Cathedral, God, there is no evidence for God."

Here are two clues. One is that the question "why is there anything at all?" holds good here and so does the answer. No matter how mind boggling the scale either very, very large or small, it is all included when you ask, "Why is there *anything* at all?" The second clue is that a still more amazing thing was not mentioned in the clip. It is that on this little speck of a blue-green planet the extra-ordinary phenomenon of human inquiry has been able to probe to these farthest reaches of the universe and down to the most minute dimensions. I claim that as we probe this extra-ordinary phenomenon, we will find that human inquiry is an icon of God. That too is for another time.

This would be a good place to finish, to say 'Three cheers' for the Lord. But that wouldn't do justice to the Living God.

I have been telling stories in which the questions" why is there anything at all?" and "why are we here?", are asked in very benign circumstances. But the questions also get asked in very different circumstances that are not benign, especially where the Covid Lock Down has revealed "in your face", the long-standing weaknesses and neglect in our society. This is especially for young people, but not only them, where the future is very uncertain, even dark,

whether about very insecure work, or the fact that they will not have a better life than their parents, and in addition there is the ominous fact of climate change that daily presses more strongly on us all. As we engage the science faith conversation, we remember that this a faith that does justice, in Christ's name, Amen.