



Know, Believe, Imagine

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Honourable members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for the honour of speaking to you this morning. And thank you for the even greater honour of praying with you.

Last month I was speaking at Yale University and after the talk, a graduate student approached who knew almost nothing about the Christian faith. We began to talk through some of her questions and before she left, we offered to pray for her. The expression on her face revealed that she didn't understand what prayer is. So we did our best to explain the concept of prayer to her and when she grasped what prayer is, for the first time, she responded, "Oh that would be such an honour."

[Praying] would be such an honour.

And those words struck me and they convicted me of how often I take prayer for granted. When this young woman grasped that someone would think she was important enough to bring her interests to God and that the God of the universe thinks she is important enough to want to hear about her and from her, the instinctive response of her heart was, "Oh that would be such an honour."

What an untainted and appropriate response! But of course, it's only an honour if God actually exists. Otherwise, we're just talking to ourselves. That's why this morning, I want to present to you a new and highly scientific argument of the existence of God that I think is going to be very influential in the years ahead and we'll see this argument on the screen. If there is no God, how come the world fits so perfectly into a chicken? Ok don't worry, I have some better arguments on the way - or let's hope.

But I do want to acknowledge as I start, that what we're doing this morning, it's a bit strange. Prayer - action at a distance - the idea that right here, right now, I can make a concrete tangible difference for my family in New Jersey simply by praying. That is absolutely incredible. If that's true, it's literally a superpower. As a Christian, I need to be honest about the fact that I believe

some absurd things - prayer for starters. But you can add to that, that a man walked on water, that the same man rose from the dead, that he was born of a virgin.

When I first read the Bible as a skeptical philosophy student at Princeton University, my habit was to write a big BS in the margins whenever I found something I thought was ridiculous. And Christians would look over my shoulder and say, "Vince, why do you have a BS in the margin of your bible?"

And I'd say, "Oh, that verse makes for a great Bible study."

I was attracted to the person of Jesus.

That was my starting point in respect to Christian faith. And around that time, I vividly remember walking into a university bookstore and picking up a book and reading the back cover, which summarized the book in an attempt to hold onto a form of Christianity, while explaining away all these supposed miracles of Jesus in naturalistic terms. And I can remember hoping it could be done, because I was attracted to the person of Jesus, the way that he carried himself, the way that he treated people.

A woman was caught in adultery and the leaders wanted to stone her. He said, "You who are without sin, throw the first stone."

And one by one, they each walked away.

Everyone believes in a virgin birth.

I was attracted to the person of Jesus, but I thought that the traditional account of Christianity was just too absurd to believe. And if Christian beliefs are absurd, that raises all sorts of important questions for our public life together. Are the people who believe them also absurd? What sort of roles should people who believe absurd things play in society? Should we take steps to ensure that absurd beliefs are not passed down to subsequent generations?

These concerns came into focus for me when I received a letter from a friend of mine, a retired Princeton professor, and he was detailing in his letter some of his objections to Christianity. And then at the end of the letter, as if to trump all the other arguments, he wrote simply, "Nor can I believe in a virgin birth."

No further argument or explanation, as if to say it would be laughable to believe in such a thing. And I began to draft an email back to this friend of mine, trying to persuade him that perhaps he could consider believing in a virgin birth. And then it dawned on me: he already does.

In fact, everyone believes in a virgin birth, whether we realize it or not. Christians believe that Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin - admittedly, I am willing to put my hand up and say that is absolutely extraordinary.

But criticism without alternative[s] is empty. A virgin birth may be unbelievable, but what exactly is the alternative? Take the brilliant Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking's attempt to propose an atheistic birth of our universe. Here's what he says, "The universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is a reason there is something rather than nothing. Why the universe exists. Why we exist."

Is that any less miraculous of a birth than the birth of Jesus? That sounds a lot like a virgin birth to me.

Or take the words of the prolific atheist philosopher Quentin Smith. He says that, "The fact of the matter is that the most reasonable belief is that we came from nothing, by nothing and for nothing. We should acknowledge our foundation in nothingness and feel awe at the marvelous fact that we have a chance to participate briefly in this incredible sunburst that interrupts without reason, the reign of nonbeing."

Now that definitely sounds like a virgin birth. And I started to think to myself. I said, "Wait a minute, maybe it's not a matter of whether we believe in a virgin birth. Maybe it's just a matter of which virgin birth we choose to accept."

And then I started to think, "Are Christians the only ones with incredible beliefs?"

The normalcy of the supernatural

Consider big picture explanations of the universe. How did all of this get here?

There are only three primary options:

Option number one - God made it. And as a Christian, I'm willing to put my hand up and say that is absolutely extraordinary. Incredible.

But what are the alternatives?

A second alternative - the universe just popped into existence from nothing, for no reason whatsoever. Now, that's also an extraordinary option. The physical stuff in our everyday lives doesn't generally just pop in and out of existence. If it doesn't now, why should we think it did at the beginning?

A third alternative - the universe has always existed, extending infinitely back in time, but still without any explanation of why that is the case. Well now perhaps you can explain each part of

the universe with a part that came before it, but you still have absolutely no explanation for why there is this enormous intricate universe in the first place. Again, that is utterly, utterly extraordinary. I call this the normalcy of the supernatural.

These three options, [...] exhaust the relevant alternatives and every single one of them is extraordinary. Every single one of them is well outside the realm of the ordinary. And even if you decide, "You know what, I'm going to remain agnostic on this, because I can see that all three of those options are incredible," well you are still logically committed to one of those three things being true and that is just as remarkable.

We live in a miraculous world. We all believe unbelievable stuff.

The conclusion, I think, is that we live in a miraculous world. In this regard, it doesn't matter whether you're a theist, an atheist or an agnostic. I don't think anyone can get around that fact. We all believe unbelievable stuff. We are all in the same boat in that respect.

And science and faith are also in the same boat in that respect. Christian faith makes the incredible claim that God the Father is immaterial, but let's not forget that science claims that 99.9999999% of the chair that you're sitting on right now is immaterial - give or take - it's mostly empty space.

Christian faith claims that God is omnipresent, but our best quantum physics suggests, or is at least open to the possibility, that the same particle can be in two different places at once.

Christian faith claims that the incarnate Jesus had both a divine nature and a human nature, but science tells us that waves have a particle nature and particles have a wave nature.

Faith claims that prayer action at a distance - extraordinary! But science claims that gravity is action at a distance - we just take that for granted.

Faith claims that we can really know God even though there is a lot about Him that is far beyond our ability to comprehend. And science tells us there is a lot we can know about the universe even though 95% of it is made of either dark matter or dark energy, phenomena that are mysteries to us.

Science gave me the license to believe the unbelievable.

Ironically, I thought Christianity was the unbelievable option and that science was the sober, sensible, rational option. I thought that science was going to force me to reject the unbelievable nature of faith, but it was precisely science that gave me the license to believe the unbelievable. The question is not whether we believe unbelievable stuff. We all do.

And here's why that matters: if we can get to a place of greater honesty about this in society, then maybe we can also get to a greater place of responding more graciously to each other when we disagree. And here, Jesus is our model.

Jesus never had an enemy he didn't love. And he never disagreed with anyone that he wasn't willing to give his life for.

Jesus did not shy away from disagreeing with people. In fact his very coming was an act of disagreement. It was a statement that we required saving, because our lives had disagreed so badly with what he intended for them. Jesus was fiercely committed both to truth and to progress, but Jesus never had an enemy he didn't love. And he never disagreed with anyone that he wasn't willing to give his life for.

Up until his last breath, Jesus prayed for those who opposed him, "*Father, forgive them.*"

How often do we pray for those who oppose us? The answer to that question will be directly correlated with how much we love those who are opposed to us.

How often do we pray for those who oppose us? The answer to that question will be directly correlated with how much we love those who are opposed to us. And I believe that the answer to that question will be directly correlated with the future health and promise of our countries. The question is not whether we believe unbelievable stuff. We all do. The question is, "Do we have good reason to believe it?"

The Bible never asks us for blind faith. For a long time I assumed that it did. But when I finally opened it and began to read it, I was greatly encouraged to see that it was full of words like "reasoning" and "explaining" and "debating" and "examining." I was encouraged to read that the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians. Why? Not for blind faith, but because they examined the evidence daily to determine if the things they were being told were true.

God is asking me to love Him not only with my heart, my soul and my strength, but also with all of my mind.

And I can remember thinking to myself, "This is not a God who is asking me for blind faith - far from it. This is a God who is asking me to love Him not only with my heart and my soul and my strength, but also with all of my mind."

So I began to study the evidence. Initially I'd assumed that science had already discredited belief in God. We used to need God to explain rain and rainbows, snowflakes and shooting stars, but now we have scientific explanations to these things and so we no longer have any need for God. That's what I thought.

But that's actually not a very good argument. As Leibniz reasoned, God is an excellent engineer. And an excellent engineer doesn't always need to keep stepping in to fix His design. The design of an excellent engineer proceeds with regularity and so when I see a new scientific discovery in the news, I celebrate it. I say, "Praise God!"

That doesn't call my faith into question, not in the least. To the contrary, it further solidifies my belief that God is a skillful designer.

And I return in my mind to Psalm 19, *"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."*

Science explains to us how things work, but that does not show that there is not a "who" behind the "how."

Science explains to us how things work - and increasingly and beautifully so - but that does not show that there is not a "who" behind the "how." Oxford professor John Lennox, good friend of mine, he uses a simple, but a very effective analogy to illustrate this point, he says:

"If your Aunt Matilda bakes you a cake, a biochemist can tell you about the structure of the proteins and the fats that are in that cake. A chemist can explain about the elements involved and their bonding. And a physicist can tell you about the behavior of the fundamental particles. And a mathematician like John can give you a set of elegant equations to explain the behavior of those particles. But it would be very odd to think that any of these explanations show that Aunt Matilda doesn't exist."

And then if you ask the further question of why the cake was made, well now the scientists are silent. Now only one person is smiling. Right. And that's Aunt Matilda. Because she made the cake and so she knows why she made the cake.

A "who" behind the "how" opens up the possibility of "why."

A "who" behind the "how" opens up the possibility of "why." And as I travel around the world and speak - oftentimes to students - it's this 3rd question - the question of "why" - that is asked most commonly, that is asked most urgently, by people of all ages and of all cultures. "Why? Why are we here? What is the purpose? What is the meaning of life?"

Meaning relies on intelligence and intentionality.

Victor Frankle said it prophetically, he said, "People have enough to live by, but nothing to live for; or they have the means, but no meaning."

What is the meaning of life? What does it mean for something to have meaning? Does this collection of letters have meaning? Well it depends. It depends on whether that's a word. It depends on whether someone intentionally [puts] those letters side by side in order to communicate something, or if it's just a random collection of letters. Meaning relies on intelligence and intentionality.

My baby niece Camille's first words were "Da-da" and my brother was so proud. And then I walked into the room and she said, "Da-da, Da-da." And then the cat walked into the room and she said, "Da-da, Da-da." And then my brother was no longer proud.

Randomness is the enemy of meaning. Even if something appears to have meaning, it might not if it's not intentional. Even when something looks meaningful, it is only actually meaningful if it is the intention of an intelligent being.

Was our universe intended?

Was our universe intended? Well over the last 35 years, the fine-tuning argument has strongly suggested that it is. Here's how. The universe we live in could have taken many different forms and scientists have approached a consensus - not just Christian scientists, but scientists in general - that there are dozens of fundamental features of the universe that needed to be precisely the way that they are, for life to be possible. Not just life on the planet earth. Not as life as we know it. But any form of life, anywhere in the universe.

To take just one example, if the explosive force of the initial expansion of the universe had been different in one part in 10 to the 60th, then no life would have been possible. If the initial expansion of the universe had been even the slightest bit weaker, gravity would have made the universe collapse back on itself almost immediately - far too quickly for any form of life to develop. If that initial expansion had been just the slightest bit stronger, particles would have dispersed literally into thin air. They would have wound up so far from each other, so quickly that all we would have gotten would have been cold, simple molecules, nothing like the sort of complex chemistry that's required for any form of life.

Sir Roger Penrose, emeritus professor at Oxford, [is] one of the world's leading mathematical physicists. He estimates that the overall difference you could have when you take all the variables into account, while still accommodating the possibility of life, is 1 part in 10 raised to the power of 10, raised in turn again to the power of 123. I would write that out as a percentage, but even if I could take all the matter in the universe and turn it into paper, I would still have far too little paper to print the required number of zeros. In fact, I would need more zeros than there are particles in the universe.

Sir Fred Hoyle, the late Cambridge astronomer, [is] one of the 20th century's most scientific thinkers. He compared the random emergence of even the simplest cell - let alone human life -

to the likelihood of a tornado blowing through a junkyard and just happening by chance to produce a perfect Boeing 747 airplane.

These are the sorts of odds that we're talking about. What explains this incredible precision? What could be intelligent enough and intentional enough to account for this?

If you are a poem, then nothing will reveal the meaning of your life like talking to the Poet who made you.

The Bible says that our universe is a poem. Not just a random collection of letters, but a poem. It uses the Greek word *poema*. And the Bible uses that word to refer to only two things: The first is the natural world. God's creation is His poem, that's Romans 1. And then in Ephesians 2, the Bible says, "*We are God's handiwork,*" you and me. Another translation reads, "*For we are God's masterpiece.*" That's that same word - *poema* (poem).

Are you a random collection of genetic letters, or are you a poem that has been carefully and caringly and intimately crafted by God Himself? Are you a *sistema*? That is the question behind the question of the meaning of life. If the world we live in is a poem, then nothing will reveal the meaning of that poem like talking to the Author. And if you are a poem, then nothing will reveal the meaning of your life like talking to the Poet who made you.

Prayer transforms the human heart.

Prayer [is] our great honour of sitting and talking with the Author of life and asking Him what it all means, and what we mean, and being changed by those conversations into the people that we were meant to be.

One person my colleagues and I had the chance to pray with recently, is named Tom. Tom spent some time considering the reasons for God. He had some questions that he needed to work through, but there came a point at which he wanted to step into a relationship with God. And he bowed his head to pray for the first time. And in simple, but clear words, he told God that he wanted His forgiveness. And he told God that he wanted to step into a daily relationship with Him.

And after he prayed that beautiful prayer - his first prayer - he opened his eyes and these were the very first words out of his mouth. He said, "I've always felt alone and like I had to wear a mask. But now this is the first time in my life that I can take off that mask and be fully myself and fully alive. I have always felt alone and like I had to wear a mask."

How many people in our society feel that? How many people in our lives feel that? How many of us feel that? How different would society look if instead we were to take off our masks and be fully ourselves and fully alive?

More than anything I have ever experienced, prayer can bring that sort of transformation of the human heart. And that's why it's my honour to commend it to you this morning. And that's why it's my honour to pray with you.

I want to thank you for giving me a hearing. I want to thank you for all the ways each one of you serves. And may God bless you and your beautiful country.