

Talk prepared May 2019 by Dan Paterson

# **FAITH, FACTS, AND FEELINGS**

## **MAKING DECISIONS IN A POST-SECULAR AGE**

*Matthew Hale Library Dinner [25 minutes]*

### **<a> INTRODUCTION...** (4 min.)

Thank you for the warm welcome and the kind invitation.

I've just returned from a few days of events and meetings with my teammates from right around the globe. From Baltic states who are even now changing borders, to the deadly conflict on the frontiers of Nigeria, to various Western nations crippled by political polarisation, and the rising economies of the Asian and South American continents. As we shared stories of what is happening at the political level, the social arena, and the spiritual sphere, you cannot help but feel disoriented by the sense that we inhabit a strangely turbulent cultural moment in history.

What does God want from us in these turbulent times?

Here in Australia the landscape is changing. Sociologists speak about the rise of the nones. And not a Whoopi Goldberg, Sister Act remake. Rather there is a rapidly growing percentage of our population that does not affiliate with religion. And they have their reasons. Christianity is considered by many to be intellectually vacuous and morally dubious. The McCrindle research continues to illuminate barriers to belief, census after census. Hypocrisy. Sexual ethics. Judgment. But in turning from God, secular Aussies seek new solutions. A secular ground upon which to pursue the *good life*. *The attempt to be good without God*.

But is it working?

And how can the Church respond to those who have lost faith?

These are the questions I want to explore in tonight's message:

***Faith, Facts, and Feelings: Making Decisions in a Post-Secular World.***

If that title seems nebulous, I promise definitions are forthcoming.

I am not amongst those who paint a dim picture of the future of the Church. The state of the culture doesn't dictate whether the gospel is *good news*, or *true news*. So even if the Church is scrambling, or has gone silent, and even if some future casters are predicting the death of denominations

in a generation, I see this moment as pregnant with opportunity. If only we have the eyes to see the opening. If only we have the courage to find our voice again. And if only we have the confidence in our gospel. For the God we serve is in the business of resurrecting that which seems dead.

Let me begin with a text that I believe needs to be the foundation of making sense of what is happening these turbulent times. This one from the closing words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. A little hint to the preachers in the room: *if you're struggling for a good sermon, you'll never go wrong if you steal one from Jesus.*

### **Read Scripture: Matthew 7:24-27**

**<b> SCRIPTURE...** (1 min.) **[SLIDE #2]**

<sup>24</sup> “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

**<c> CULTURAL ANALYSIS...** (8 min.) **[SLIDE #3]**

Jesus' metaphors are always shallow enough for children to play and deep enough for scholars to plumb. Here Jesus summarises in a few sentences the rise and fall of civilisations, as well as the rise and fall of personal lives. Jesus teaches that storms are inevitable. But whether or not the fury of the elements wreaks havoc, well that depends entirely upon what we have chosen to build our lives upon. Do we build upon the foundation of God's sacred story, of which Jesus is the centre, or do we search for some new ground.

Western civilisation is a prodigal culture. Dozens books in the last decade have argued the thesis that the best of the West has nothing to do with the Enlightenment and secularism, and everything to do with our Judaeo-Christian roots. From Rodney Stark to Vishal Mangalwadi. Aussies John Dickson and Greg Sheridan. Even the agnostic historian and columnist Tom Holland. The best of the West, we're told, is an *inheritance*. And it is one brashly claimed by Enlightenment style thinkers, who are confident they can keep the riches of their Judea-Christian

heritage, even as they uproot in search of new philosophical lands in which to settle. The secular Exodus from religious captivity set out with the promise of a better world, a utopian vision of a promised land. But what began as the search for a seaside view has ended up becoming the *Secular Wanderings*. What do I mean by this phrase?

Well just like God's nation Israel, wandering a generation in the desert, secular people are starting to grumble at the new reality. There is nowhere to settle on these shifting sands. And after the initial excitement of throwing off religion into what Oxford philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, called negative freedom, the absence of constraint, an unbridled autonomy, now, secular people are starting to awaken to deeper and unsatisfied hungers. The very hungers placed there by their Creator to serve as Heaven's GPS beacon pointing them home.

One of the most common questions I'm asked in Australia during Q&A forums is this: "I'm happy, why do I need God?" To which I often respond: *are you happy because of your secularism, or in spite of your secularism?*

Because secularism produces a culture without a soul. Everything that we consider to make up the *thick* aspects of who we are as humans, everything *we* love the most, what Francis Schaeffer called the *mannishness of man*, cannot be explained on secularism, or rather is explained away. Love, not the supreme ethic, merely a neurochemical reaction serving evolutionary survival. Justice, not an objective hope, merely a relative social standard from person to person, and culture to culture. Freedom, not a real agency, merely an illusion of choice from an illusory consciousness. Rationality, not following evidence through to a warranted conclusion, but merely a neural pathway preprogrammed by biological determinism. You see, a secular view of the world tends to deny the deepest things of who we are, setting the heart and mind at war. Driving a wedge between facts and feelings. And it creates a terrible dissonance. We're told we have no purpose, even though we're obsessed with searching for one. We're told there is no meaning to life, even though we cannot live without it. It was Victor Frankl, the Jewish Psychiatrist who endured Auschwitz, who observed that without a sure *why* for our existence, we cannot survive the *how*.<sup>1</sup> The storms of life do their work, and a life without God will simply not stand.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1959).

A life with God: *the rock*. A life without God: *shifting sands*.

And even if our secular neighbours deny God's existence, they still have to live in God's world. Everything in creation conspires against our atheistic tendencies. The world is charged with what Peter Berger calls signals of transcendence. Ways God is breaking into people's otherwise materialistic outlook, like rays of sunlight piercing the dark clouds. And so beauty and mathematics, love and rationality, justice and freedom. These are just some of the reasons why the secularisation thesis has failed.

The world is not becoming less religious. It may be becoming less religiously affiliated, since we've lost confidence that what Jesus had to say is *good* and *true* news, and so the Church has been muted. But as Charles Taylor has pointed out, *this is now a post-secular world*.

Take the Notre Dame fire. Here we are, at the beginning of Holy Week, with the entire world arrested in their tracks to watch the flames blaze. Why? This is just an old building. A building connected to an institution which is hated amongst so many in the secular West for its hypocrisy and opulence. This should be cause for celebration, right? And yet, *mourning*. Seculars singing hymns in the streets. Why? *Because the fire stirred in our souls this abiding sense of something lost*.

It was Julian Barnes, the prize winning writer, who opened his 2008 memoir with these words: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him."

Western culture, like Notre Dame, is hollowed out. The inheritance is running low. Secular thinkers are bankrupt. But just as he predicted, Jesus has something serious to offer this post-secular age as our confidence for a life apart from God crumbles around us.

So here, let me switch from diagnosis to be as practical as I can. *What would God have us do? What does our gospel have to offer? How do we reach people in our post-secular age?*

### **<d> PREACHING TO POST-SECLARS... (9 min.)**

I want to suggest tonight that just like Jesus, our job is to tell a story, and to inhabit it, all at the same time. The Bible isn't a creed; it's a story. One into which we are all invited to take our place in its pages. And so despite all the doubts and objections, despite religious and political

pressures, this is not a moment for us to adopt a defensive tone or posture. Now is the moment to the Church to be on the front foot to share why *the gospel is good and true news*.

*But how to do we do that?* Let me suggest two ways I've seen this helpfully play out in the ministry.

*#1 Connect the Bible to people's felt questions.* Ben Shapiro, the Jewish conservative political commentator in the USA, has become famous amongst young people the world over for his slogan: *facts don't care about your feelings*. And that may be true. Facts don't much care about anything. But the God who grounds all facts certainly *does* care about our feelings. In fact, it seems, God has shaped our nature in such a way that we *primarily* respond by feeling.

When it comes to decision making, especially in morally significant matters, some of the best research has been done by the secular Jewish psychologist, Jonathan Haidt. In his 2012 book, *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt shares this research, testing whether the heart or the mind, whether feelings or facts, play a greater role in shaping people's beliefs. His findings are unambiguous, summed up in his metaphor of the Elephant and the rider. Basically, when it comes to forming beliefs and making decisions, people *respond intuitively, with what matches their feelings*, and only then call on conscious reason, or facts, to help justify their feelings.

In other words, Haidt is profoundly Anglican for a Jewish agnostic. Listen to how Dr Ashley Hull, the leading expert on Thomas Cranmer, summarises his theological anthropology:

*"What the heart wants, the will chooses, and the mind justifies."*<sup>2</sup>

We all possess *motivated reasoning*. If we want something to be true, we ask the question, *can I believe it?* If we don't want something to be true, we ask the question, *must I believe it?* Depending on whether we *want* to accept something, we unconsciously change the bar for evidence.

So why is this important? People are *far more likely to respond to our gospel if it connects with what they are searching for*.

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<sup>2</sup> ACL 2002 Interview with Dr Ashley Hull  
<http://acl.asn.au/resources/dr-ashley-null-on-thomas-cranmer/>



Consider the greatest questions of our time. Freedom: *what does it mean to be free?* Identity: *who are we really?* Meaning: *what makes life worth living?* Satisfaction: *how can I be truly happy?* Hope: *where do we look to fix what is wrong?*

These are not sub-themes of the Christian story. They are central to the storyline from Genesis to Revelation. We have a *better story* than our secular neighbours. Jesus is *good news* for every aspect of life. And in speaking to people's questions through the lens of the Bible that we get to whet their appetite. To show that Christianity is a house you *want* to live in. To employ the imagination as a vehicle to steal past the watchful dragons of motivated reasoning and cold scepticism.

It was Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French scientist, who said: "We should first make Christianity attractive, make good men *wish* it were true, and then show them that it is." That is what our preaching must do.

Connect the Bible to people's felt questions.

*#2 Connect the Bible to reality.* Behind every question I'm ever asked is one of two questions. Is God good, and is this true? If people become convinced of the first, there are a host of reasons why people question the second, and we need to give an answer.

It used to be enough to have a few intellectual champions as apologists who were cheered on by the Christian masses, but now, given the secular climate, we need to have apologetically minded churches who are able to make space for doubt and address key questions, all in an atmosphere of hospitality where Christians are following the story.

And there has never been a greater time to do this. The last century has witnessed a resurgence in Christian scholarship in fields previously abandoned to the Enlightenment. In New Testament scholarship, the case for eyewitness status of the gospel sources has never been stronger. In the realms of science, all kinds of discoveries are not pointing to a god of the gaps in our ignorance, but upwards by warranted inference to a necessary intelligence. From the origins and fine-tuning of our universe in cosmology, to the structure of DNA in chemical biology, science seems to be resurrecting the God hypothesis, not burying it. In philosophy, the award winning Quintin Smith recently lambasted his fellow atheist

philosophers for losing so much ground to theistic philosophers over the past 50 years. On balance, some admit the arguments alone favour God. In sociology, study after study, and even meta studies of the studies, reveals that devoted religious believers score higher in nearly every marker for wellbeing available. When surveyed, 47% of people who attended Church weekly reported being “very happy” in life, compared to only 28% of the nones, the religiously unaffiliated.

In a recent conversation with Sam Harris, the famed figurehead New Atheist, another atheist, Robin Hanson, who is something of a whiz as an economist, philosopher, and physicist, brought up this data. Here’s what he said: *“Religious people on average live longer, earn more, their marriages stay longer, they have less crime. They’re healthier. ... That’s a real puzzle if you think they’re just all making a big mistake.”*<sup>3</sup>

Because this is God’s world, reality is on our side. Recently I spoke at a pub on the question of *Am I Crazy to Believe in God?* A young lawyer came, post-christian in attitude. Surely we’re past all this religion stuff, right? But as the talk went on, and into the Q&A, and afterwards a drink together to talk it all through, I came to see that, although he is post-christian in attitude, he is completely pre-Christian in understanding. He knew almost nothing of the hope of our gospel, nor the reasons for that hope. And after asking questions for hours, he had heard enough. A lawyer became convinced by the evidence of God’s reality, and how it impacts his own. So we need to connect the Bible to reality.

For when you live in the world God created, build your life upon the story and teachings of Jesus, skepticism continues to crash against the house, only without the desired effect. Doubts are welcome, but those doubts merely become a doorway through which a stronger faith emerges, because those doubts lead to questions, and those questions are met with meaningful answers.

## **<e> CONCLUSION...** (3 min.)

That is what God asks of us in this time. Faithfulness to his word. Confidence in the gospel's power. Speaking Christian truth with the humility of a Christian accent. And connecting the refugees from our post-

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<sup>3</sup> [https://arcdigital.media/the-aging-of-new-atheism-2d1f7b17a455?fbclid=IwAR20dG\\_cuuv2sHT4YDI0f\\_PH2OVIo2CRPgMuDegbbmH7g4eEkiC0eWjxZAs](https://arcdigital.media/the-aging-of-new-atheism-2d1f7b17a455?fbclid=IwAR20dG_cuuv2sHT4YDI0f_PH2OVIo2CRPgMuDegbbmH7g4eEkiC0eWjxZAs)  
Cited March 30th 2019.

secular culture to the gospel by means of showing them how Jesus answers their felt questions, and how he can be trusted with their lives.

I'll close with this story.

When I was in Oxford, there is a small cobbled cross in the centre of Broad Street. It marks the spot where the three Oxford Martyrs gave up their lives for their profession of faith. That salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Truth mattered to them. It was worth dying for. But now? People walk all over this cross. Students often don't know a thing of the story.

The three men were Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer. Imprisoned together, Ridley and Latimer were executed first, as the authorities hoped it would lead Cranmer to reconsider. Biographers record the final words of these men in 1555. As the flames lapped up around their legs, Latimer is recorded as saying: *"Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."*

And by God's grace, they did. The Anglican communion continues. The truth for which they died secured, and even now in our modern era, confirmed by new and old discoveries.

The ancient stones like the cobbled cross on Broad Street, or like the hollowed remains of Notre Dame; these simply mark ecclesiastical history. Beautiful for sure, but there is no *life* in these stones. It is the Christians within, the witnesses, the *marturia*, who serve as candles lighting people's path back to the Father's house. That was true of the Oxford Martyrs. It is true today of my Anglican friends in Nigeria, laying down their lives to share with their Muslim neighbours of the death and resurrection of our Lord. Will it be true of us as well?

Our gospel is precious. It is the only hope of humanity. The only foundation on which life can be built to withstand the storms. And now, in this post-secular time, with a living faith built on the convergence of facts and feelings, this is no time for the Church to be silent. By God's grace I hope we continue to speak. Christian truth with a Christian accent.

**Prayer.**



May God give you the strength, wisdom, courage, and humility to play your part in extending the gospel of our Lord.

Thank you very much for this privilege.