

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

John Dickson (Studio)

A few weeks ago, Australia experienced a rare trauma. At a shopping centre by Bondi Beach, a man attacked dozens and killed 6 with a knife. The *New York Times* headline read: “At least 6 dead in mall stabbing that horrifies Australians.”

It was knocked off the international headlines, hours later, because it coincided with Iran attacking Israel.

But as many Aussies, especially Sydneysiders, were reeling, one of the country’s most respected journalists wrote what I thought was an astonishing reflection.

Stan Grant is an award-winning journalist and has worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and as a Senior International Correspondent for CNN in Asia and the Middle East. He’s a Wiradjuri man, and is the author of several books on Indigenous issues in Australia and his Aboriginal identity.

We reached out to him and asked if he’d be willing to record his piece on the Bondi events for *Undeceptions*. I’m grateful, Stan.

Here it is.

Stan Grant

The morning after the tragedy at Bondi Junction, I was in my church to ask God how such crimes are possible. Why does evil exist in the world? Why do the innocent suffer? How could we speak of forgiveness to the grieving families entitled to their vengeance?

If God is omnipotent and omniscient, then God surely must be cruel. God failed the test of his love. God did not protect his children. In the

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

eternal battle with darkness, darkness claimed another victory, and the Devil has had too many victories. Each time a human kills another human, the Devil dances.

Perhaps Victor Hugo was right when he said God wastes his time making the flowers and the stars.

In our grief, God is so distant. C. S. Lewis said we go to God when we are desperate and all other help is in vain, but God slams the door. All we get is silence; the longer we wait, the more emphatic the silence.

“Thy will be done” is the most callous of God’s decrees. What God wills the sacrifice of the defenceless and falls silent?

At times like these, the faithless have all the answers. I am a fool to believe in God. The universe is a crapshoot of numbers and humans are just the triumph of selfish genes.

Okay. You win. Atheists, have your day: the world and everything in it is yours. There is no divine. A sunrise is just a trick of the light, scattered by gas molecules and dispersed at the horizon. Shakespeare lied about the glorious morning kissing with golden face the meadows green.

Love doesn’t live in our hearts: love is a chemical mix of dopamine and norepinephrine. Burn that Barrett Browning poem that counts the ways of love to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach.

Don’t speak of the soul; it belongs to neuroscientists.

All that is beautiful is subject to science. Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 is only a sound vibration that exercises my brain’s neural circuits.

Strip the world of the divine and render the stars as balls of gas. Stare up at the sky and count and measure, but leave wonder for the ignorant.

Let mathematics rule over God. Let philosophers bury God.

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

Who needs God? And then...?

I watch the news and see God. I see strangers defending strangers. I see people shielding children. I see a man on an escalator staring down a killer with a knife. Someone described him as a “god tier legend”.

To the smartest people who ever lived, who have told us we are hardwired for survival, I ask them: explain this.

Thomas Hobbes said human lives are solitary, nasty, brutish and short. Did he never hold a child? I read about two men who stemmed the bleeding of a baby handed to them by her dying mother.

Thank God these people never inherited the selfish gene.

I have seen the worst our world can do. I have covered war and misery in more than 50 countries. I have seen the Hobbesian world: a war of all against all. Sometimes killers praised God – sometimes God was at the head of the armies. But that wasn't God.

God was in the grieving mothers, smiling through tears. God was in my friends who worked alongside me and in the love we shared to drive away our nightmares.

We would sit around at night playing music and singing. We shared poetry and we would laugh. God lived in us. Some of my friends are no longer alive, but they live in me.

Suffering did not drive me from God, it drew me to God.

I look at my parents and I marvel at their scarred grace. Life has sometimes drained their souls – my father's body records the bruises of Australia – but their home is a place of love and peace and the face of Jesus looks down on all who enter. That's their offering to the world.

Scientists might tell my parents their faith is a weakness. Okay, now tell me the equation for tears. Show me a painting to reason. Tell

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

Michelangelo he laboured in delusion. Tell Galileo and Newton they were cleverer than God.

Science is God's gift and we are humbled by what we cannot know. Werner Heisenberg cracked the code of quantum physics and found not certainty but mystery. The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, he said, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you.

There are times I stumble and my faith wavers. I recall interviewing a priest after the Dunblane massacre in Scotland – the deadliest mass shooting in British history, in which 16 children and one teacher were killed. The priest had to comfort the bereaved, he held their pain and I asked him, where was God? He said simply: Does this make any more sense if God does not exist?

Do the events of last Saturday make any sense? Take away God; does science comfort you?

If it is too soon to speak of God, I am sorry. Maybe those devastated by this madness resent God – maybe that is the most human response of all, maybe that is what those killed demand. Maybe some have lost their faith. I can't say that mine would survive something like this. I have lost faith in God for less. There are times I have wandered from God, but God has always found me.

I don't know if anyone wants my prayers, but I need to pray – if only for myself. I need to step out of the world and church is my refuge. I have always found the book of Peter to be among the most haunting and he called the faithful to live out our time like strangers in a world that values perishable treasures. We should be purified by the truth that we have sincere love for one another.

On the morning after that awful day, I knelt in church alongside two young men I had never seen before, our heads bowed and our hands clasped tight. We had locked out the world and I knew we shared the same prayer.

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

In our prayers we shrink. We empty ourselves so there is no space for our violent egos, our rapacious knowledge. There is only space for our better image – the image of God. Here we find beauty not in the greedy eye of the beholder but in the transcendent, where beauty exists for our enjoyment not our use.

Our priest dedicates the service to those who have died and those who loved them. It is a message of compassion but sometimes I want more from the church – I want the church to be angry or confused, just as I am, as we all are. Churches can sometimes be austere places that preach a love for all but a love for no one.

We are humans and ours is a broken love, and more beautiful for it. I see God in his glory in the streets with the gifts of flowers and simple prayers. Right now that's all of our church. Saint Teresa of Ávila said Jesus had no hands but ours, no mouth but ours.

Our priest reminds us forgiveness is God's great challenge – the final prayer of Christ. Oh, forgiveness is hard, maybe too hard right now.

Then I see a distraught father who bears the crimes of his son, and he says he can't stop loving him and my heart breaks because I love my children too. Am I wrong to feel heartbroken for the father of the killer? Do not the families of the victims have first call on my heart? This is so hard to write because words shatter against the pain of the world. All I know is this – and I am sure of this more than I am sure of anything – God is love and I pray that is enough.

Jesus rose and bore his wounds so others might know him. His wounds were a reminder of what the world can do to us, but they were also a symbol of hope that this is not all the world will be.

In grief and fear and confusion we knock on God's door and all we hear is silence. God may be absent but I like to believe God is only waiting. C.S. Lewis, abandoned in his grief, said he came to feel the door to God was no longer shut and bolted.

SINGLE: Bondi Junction

In church, I find a quiet gravity – a silence. I like to believe God's silence is how God tells us he is listening.

John Dickson (studio)

I'm grateful to Stan for recording this for us. And I'm still thinking of all those who have been affected by this terrible event.

Actually, Stan will be appearing in a live podcast recording for *Undeceptions* in Sydney, when I'm back in my hometown in July. Details soon. It will be fun to see some of you there.

We'll be back with next week with our next full episode of *Undeceptions*. See ya.