

18th September, Matins
John 7:14-36 and Ezra 1
The Sovereignty of God
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I'd like to concentrate our focus this morning on one verse from our NT reading, verse 30, which says, "So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come" and I'll also touch on our OT passage Ezra 1. I put these thoughts together before the sad news of the death of our beloved Queen Elizabeth but it feels even more poignant today to think together for a few minutes on the sovereignty of God, a topic that the Venerable Richard Frank touched on in his sermon last Sunday.

I'm not sure how you imagine this scene described in our gospel reading. But it sounds like there was quite a lot of noise, confusion, things were crowded. Jesus was at the Temple and it was the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles that is celebrated around this time of year, in September or October. The Jews would build outdoor shelters to remember God's faithfulness to Israel during the wilderness years. At the same time, it was a festival of celebration in thanksgiving for the harvest. Presumably plenty of wine had been enjoyed. The crowd were muttering amongst themselves, some thought he might be the Messiah, the anointed one, come to save Israel, but others weren't so sure. Nobody spoke openly because they were afraid of being arrested.

Then we don't know exactly what happened but the people who had been sent to arrest Jesus, just could not lay a hand on him because v30 says, "his hour had not yet come." For John, Jesus' 'hour' meant his crucifixion. Even though Jesus was destined to die, God's timing had to be perfect, and he did not allow Jesus to be arrested early. Despite appearances to the contrary, God is sovereign over all creation.

But you might say to me, how can we possibly have trust in the sovereignty of God, when we see the mess our world is in, our own country, Europe and the climate crisis? And perhaps we can add, to the messiness of life, our own lives and those around us, the pain and sickness that so many of us experience, whether physical, emotional or otherwise.

Ultimately, it's going to come down to our trusting God through difficult times but I do have three thoughts or illustrations which might help us.

1. The first thought is theological.

God is our Creator and he loves us. He didn't have to create the universe but did it in love. He created out of nothing, he didn't struggle to create but simply spoke the universe into existence effortlessly, however you understand that happening physically. Therefore, the Bible tells us that there is nothing outside his control, even if circumstances can vividly suggest otherwise. And God did not stay outside of his creation, but became a human being like us, being born as the man Jesus to Mary, to save us and give us a hope.

2. The second illustration is a personal testimony.

In a previous job, I worked for a large organisation and I was publicly blamed for something that I had not done. This was a hard time for me but during it, my father-in-law lent me an excellent book called "God meant it for good" by R T Kendall. The book is based on the story of Joseph, how he is wrongly accused, sent to prison and stays there a long time. In R T Kendall's book, it described how the turning point can sometimes be that a message comes from a far off land, which changes the situation.

Now we had just been on holiday as a family on the US West Coast and had helped a young Korean woman there who happened to fall over in the street and hurt herself quite badly, just as we were walking by. She hardly spoke any English, but we managed to drive her to hospital,

stayed with her, and then went out for a meal together when she had been patched-up. All she really knew was my name and the company I worked for and that it was in the UK.

Anyway, about a month after this, she sent an email to our customer services, who passed it on to my department, who passed it on to me. It really was quite extraordinary that she bothered to send the email and it did reach me in an organisation of 90,000 people. And, in it, she said to the company about how we had looked after her and she was still overwhelmed with the kindness she'd been shown. She said, "Your company must be lucky to have employees like Mike." And for me, this really said it all and helped me know that it was time to move on. I got the first job I applied for and found it immensely fulfilling.

3. The third illustration is the the Jews in Persia - the story in Ezra.

Things seemed pretty hopeless for the people of Israel. Many had been killed in the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of Israel and Judah, and the remainder taken captive in chains to Persia. Perhaps many had given up on the idea of ever returning to the promised land. But we read in Ezra 1v1 that, by his sovereign power, God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, allowing and encouraging the Jews who had been captured and living in exile in Persia, to return to Jerusalem and re-build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel.

So what does all this mean for us?

For you - perhaps you are feeling trapped in your circumstances, and tempted to give up on God, or of anything good happening. Or perhaps you continue to grieve for the loss of our Queen as we think of her funeral to be held tomorrow. I believe the Lord would want to encourage you to remember him, to trust in him, to turn your heart to him and worship him again in faith.

Or maybe you relate to the story about Joseph or my experience of being wrongly accused. The way things worked out doesn't mean the wrong that happened doesn't matter. And sometimes there might be other actions we need to take in these situations, but for me, I really saw how God was and is sovereign over the most difficult and even long-term situations, as I faced at that time.

Proverbs 25:25 says, "Like cold water to a thirsty (or weary) soul, so is good news from a far country." If your soul is feeling thirsty or weary this morning, then God is saying to you that he is sovereign and to trust in him. The cold water, the good news will come.

I believe there are some for whom this message is making you think of a family member or friend. Is God calling you to be Jesus to that person, to spend time with them and to encourage them that God is sovereign and that he can be trusted?

Ultimately, Jesus is our example. He suffered derision, extreme physical pain, being wrongly accused and the death of a criminal in the worst torturous death that the Roman Empire could devise at the time. But it didn't end there, God had a purpose in it all, like the title of that book, God meant it for good.

Whatever you have been through or your friend or family member has been through, I encourage you to bring it to Jesus, lay it at the foot of the cross, and look up to worship our sovereign God, to our saviour Jesus, who died for us and rose again, to give us hope and life, both life now and for eternity. Amen.