

The Sovereign God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2023

Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Let's bow our heads, shall we, for a prayer before I open my mouth.

We just sung these words to God, faithful forever, perfect in love, you are sovereign over us. Father, we thank you that you are a sovereign God, and Lord, when the world around us is in turmoil, when the world a little closer to home is in turmoil, we pray that we might leave this place today sure and certain that whatever's happening, you are still in control.

So, Father, would you open our eyes, would you open our ears, and open our hearts, that we might see you as you are, and Lord, trust in who you are, and live as though we trust in who you are. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So, I want to preach on a verse from that rather curious reading we had from the book of Daniel.

[1 : 29] The book of Daniel, I think, is a remarkable book, but I want to talk to you from Daniel chapter 7, verses 13 and 14. Daniel says this, In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The book of Daniel is a peculiarly difficult book, and part of the reason it's difficult is that the scholars, whoever they are, are very discordant about when it was written.

Most modern scholars think that it was written around about 160 BC, whereas traditionally the church thought that the book of Daniel was written probably in the 6th or 7th century, in other words, hundreds of years before.

[2 : 49] And there's an interesting reason for that divergence. And it's this, that modern scholars can no longer accept that anybody who prophesied anything in the Bible that came true, modern scholars couldn't accept that it was authentic.

They thought it must be after the event that they did their prophecies, rather than before the event. So you need to know, before I start, that I am not a modern scholar.

I think this was written 6 or 7 centuries before Jesus came to earth. And I think that makes the prophecy, though I agree the language is, let's say, tricky.

The language is a little tricky. That what Daniel was prophesying here was unbelievably brought to bear in the coming of Jesus.

Those of you who know your Bibles will know that the text I just read to you is reminiscent of Mark's Gospel, chapter 6, where Jesus said of himself, the Son of Man will come on clouds of glory.

[4 : 01] Daniel knew something. And his prophecies and his book, I think, if you've never read it, I mean, okay, there are some spooky bits, a bit like this.

But I mean, the story of Daniel. Daniel, who probably is mostly known for surviving the fiery furnace, and then, just to kind of keep him interested, he had to survive the lion's den.

All because he was prepared to stand up for his faith in God. He didn't know the Lord Jesus personally, he didn't know about the death and resurrection of Jesus, he didn't know about atonement, he didn't know any of these things.

But he chose to put his trust in God. And I want to say to you that when I saw what my subject was today, my heart skipped a beat.

And there's a reason for that. I think to myself, how dare I stand up in front of all you and talk about the sovereignty of God in a world where there is more turmoil than most of us have seen in our lifetime?

[5 : 08] Why? Now, here's the thing. Daniel prophesied it. All that language about four horns, we're told in chapter 7, a little further on than we read this morning.

When Daniel had his vision, here's a wonderful understatement, right? Daniel says, I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit. Wouldn't you be if you had a dream like that?

I think most of you are going to get your medication fixed. So God spoke to him again. And in verse 16 it says he gave an interpretation.

The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. I don't know whether you've noticed it, but in world affairs, in global affairs just now, there are four dynasties that are posing a huge threat to what we might call global peace, if there ever was such a thing.

The first one is China and its expansionist policies in the Southern Pacific. Put together with the fact that China, as we sit here comfortably in a warm church on Sunday morning, China is buying up just about every last piece of fertile land in Africa.

[6 : 35] Of course, this is expansionism. The Chinese reckon that their population will be 1.5 billion by 2035, and somehow they're going to have to feed those people.

The second great beast in our world is Russian expansionism, and the fear that Ukraine might just be the beginning of something which might continue. There are plenty of people in the satellite states of the old Soviet Union who are terrified that what Putin wants to do is to remake the old Soviet Union.

Apparently there are some people in this country who think that would be great. Thirdly, the unstable, again, another understatement, the unstable leadership of North Korea.

I don't know about you, but I mean, I take a look at that funny little guy that runs the show, and I think to myself, you know, this is almost comical, except that, of course, he's developing long-range missiles that can deliver lethal damage into countries around.

You remember that wasn't that long ago there. He decided to fire missiles, not missiles that were armed, but missiles over Japan just to kind of keep them in line.

[7 : 58] And then last, but certainly not least, the appalling situation. We see in a highly volatile and febrile situation in the Middle East.

You couldn't really stand up and speak about sovereignty in a more volatile global situation, but then when you come home, it doesn't read much better. The cost of living crisis.

I know that there will be some of you in the house this morning who are really worried about your financial future, about whether you will be able to afford even basic things.

Some of you are worried because you think you might be ill, and the NHS, not my phrase, somebody else is on the verge of collapse. It is reckoned that by this time next year, there will be over 8 million people on waiting lists, and some of them will have life-threatening conditions.

Law and order. Oh, my goodness. The last recorded statistics from the Office of National Statistics tell us that in the last year they kept figures only 5.6 of all reported crime ended up with a prosecution.

[9 : 20] Our prisons are completely overcrowded, and the delay in courts is frankly shocking. Nobody goes around anymore saying justice delayed is justice denied anymore.

The environmental challenge. The confused moral compass of our nation. And finally, the state of the church.

A.N. Wilson, speaking about the Church of England, wrote this in the, I think it was the Times newspaper, it might have been the Daily Telegraph, I can't remember. He said this, Christianity is of its essence contra mundum, that means against the world.

Its values invert those of liberal modern life. The hierarchy of the established church, he goes on, I was one of them, is largely composed of people, sorry, of men and women, whose mindset is entirely shaped by that godless liberalism.

We're members of that church. I was a leader in that church, and believe me, I do not accept the tenets, I think you've got the message about this, I do not accept the tenets of modern liberalism.

[10 : 42] So, I have to ask myself, and ask you, in the context of this global, national, and maybe personal turmoil, how on earth do we make sense of God's sovereignty?

How dare we even think about talking about it? And I hope by the time you leave church this morning, you will be reassured that no matter what is going on in the world, what is going on in the United Kingdom, what is going on in your life, I hope you'll be reassured that God is still in control.

And so I ask myself the question, are there any clues from Scripture? It's Bible Sunday after all, as we've been reminded. Are there any clues from Scripture that might help us?

Well, the first thing is this, that the Bible, throughout, makes it clear that all this turbulence will happen before Jesus returns.

Daniel chapter 7 would be a very good example of this. You remember the first bit of Daniel's vision is about the four horns, which represent the four beasts who will rise up in the world and cause carnage.

[12:07] The last bit of our reading was about the Son of Man who will return and will have authority and power, sovereign power, over the world order.

The Bible makes it clear throughout that all this will happen. In 2 Timothy chapter 3, a chapter that some of you may be familiar with.

Paul writes this, mark this, he says, chapter 3, verse 1, there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

And that's just for starters. Does that ring any bells with you? I have stood here many times and said one of the big problems of our society is lost any sense of coherent meaning.

People seem to think by their behavior that the way, the only way you find meaning in life is to get as much money as you can and have a good time.

[13:29] And you say, Mike, are you against a good time? No, I quite like a good time personally. But there are limits to how far I will go to create that good time.

Romans chapter 1, another passage which talks about the world in turmoil. The reason for it, says Paul in Romans 1, it's very simple. It's the world is turning godless.

When the world turns godless, this is the kind of stuff that will emerge. In one way, we shouldn't even be surprised, should we? The second thing that's a clue from scripture is this.

It is the idea that at the moment when we open our eyes and look around, even those of us who regard ourselves as having insight and intuition, when we look at the world, we only see partially.

The difficult thing when bad things are happening, in the world, in your life, in our country, whatever, the difficult thing is that question, how come a loving God allows this?

[14:43] that must be a question that anybody who is half intelligent would ask themselves, what is going on, Lord? I did give this message a subtitle, which probably I should have read to you a little earlier, but I said, where do you go?

My subtitle was, where do you go when it seems that the wheels are falling off? of the globe, of the nation, of your life?

I think there are two things we need to think about in the light of that question. Why does a loving God allow this? Firstly, our perspective when we look at adversity is always partial.

in 1 Corinthians 13, interestingly, a Bible passage which is mostly read at weddings, but at the, towards the end of that short chapter, you remember, it's a chapter about love, you know, love is patient, love is kind, just like most marriages.

And Paul writes this, he said, when I was a child, I taught like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

[16:05] Now, he says, now, in the moment, to use a current jargon, now we see but a poor reflection. Then, we shall see face to face.

Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. I don't think that means that our question about why God allows such things is wrong.

I just think that what Paul writes there gives that question a different context. We're told that finally we will have to live with some unanswered questions.

When I was a young fellow, I thought to myself when I became a Christian that faith had all the answers. I'm sure now that faith actually helps me live with all my unanswered questions.

And I know that kind of faith can help you as well. What will come? What will be when we meet the Lord face to face?

[17:23] Is it everything we don't understand now? Everything that challenges the very roots of our faith will one day be made clear. Your questions will be answered.

Secondly, in relation to this difficult question, why does a loving God allow this? God chose, God chose to give us free will.

the ability to make choices, but also the responsibility to take responsibility for those choices. We have to live to bear with the choices we make. Ezekiel chapter 18, God says to a people who are in exile and desperate to escape responsibility, God says to them, don't go around blaming everybody else for your situation.

Why? God says to them, the soul that sins will surely die. You might, if you are of a philosophical nature, ask the question, well, why would God give us the ability to make choices?

[18 : 44] Wouldn't it be better if we had no choice and therefore God made all the choices and we were like puppets on a string somehow pulled, the strings being pulled by the divine puppeteer.

In the book of Genesis, right at the beginning, we read of a perfect world called the Garden of Eden. Apparently, it's somewhere in the Middle East, I believe in the country of Iraq right now.

It's just a bit difficult to get to see it in these current times. In Genesis, we read of the man and woman living in a sin-free environment in this beautiful garden.

And God says just one thing you must not do. I mean, that in itself is a kind of attractive possibility, isn't it? I mean, are you like this?

So, when I was at college, only the dons of my university could walk on the grass. Could not resist walking on the grass.

[19 : 59] God says don't do one thing. Don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You know what happens.

And it's happened from that day onwards. that our relationship which before the fall, before that event of disobedience, ever since then, we have chosen to go our own way rather than God's way. And that is why we need a savior. To those of you who think that God might just be a good friend in heaven, you missed the point.

What you need, my friend, is a rescue plan. A rescue plan that will help you avoid the consequences of your sinfulness.

And here I have to mention an idea that's gathered huge momentum in modern society. It's an idea called determinism.

[21 : 09] And of course, like most bad ideas, up to a point it's right, but when it's pursued more than that which is reasonable becomes a very bad idea.

Let me try and give you a definition of determinism. I can imagine over Sunday lunch you're going to be saying to people, wow, this morning we heard a philosophical definition of determinism. Enjoy. Here's a definition, the doctrine that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will.

Let me say that again because that's the platform of it, the basis. The doctrine that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will.

It goes on. Some philosophers have taken determinism to imply that individual human beings, that's you, that individual human beings have no free will and cannot be held morally responsible for their actions.

[22 : 19] Seriously? I mean, if that is taken to its nth degree, what the philosopher here is telling you is you can live in whatever way you want, you can commit as much sin as you want, and it will never be regarded as your fault.

Let me ask you a question. Don't put your hands up. Does that shock you? That seriously intelligent people would take a half-God idea, half-good idea, and turn it into a monstrous idea?

Immediately, you can see the attraction of this doctrine. It means that I never have to take responsibility for the choices I make, because it's not my fault.

I say it has some semblance in truth, this idea, because we know that poverty has life outcomes that are often diminished.

But even the poor have choices to make. And to suggest that all poverty is going to lead to bad choices, is patronizing on people who have been brought up in poverty and made good choices.

[23 : 38] I suppose a good example of that right now is the way people are starting to think about shoplifting. And you may have picked up on this, but the idea is shoplifting is now a victimless crime.

Based on the lie, then actually it's only poor people who go shoplifting, and because they're poor, it's not their fault, therefore we must forgive them. They mustn't be prosecuted.

How patronizing. How patronizing on all the wonderful people who live in poverty, who don't decide to go and shoplift. Counterintuitively, when the church is confused, when there are those big

questions to be answered, when the world is in turmoil, the early Christians, instead of carping about God's sovereignty, felt the need to express it clearly.

God's sovereignty, and not only did they want to express God's sovereignty clearly, they wanted to live as though they believed in the light of God's sovereignty.

You remember in Acts chapter 4, there's a moment when the future of the church is put under hideous pressure. Peter and John are told by the Jewish council, you must no longer speak in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[25 : 12] Can you imagine where the church would be if Peter and John had shut up about the Christian faith from day one? We'd be in a worse state than we were.

I doubt we'd have lasted this long, to be honest. I think Christianity would have just returned within Judaism and still be waiting for the Lord Jesus to come a first time.

Now, in those early days, they were stopped. It's interesting, isn't it? The opponents of the Christian faith knew from day one that if you want to stop the church from spreading, all you need to do is stop it from speaking.

So why didn't they go back and say to the believers who were gathered together, okay guys, the game's up. There'll be no more preaching from today. We've got to keep, if I might borrow a Jewish word, shtum.

So they go back to the believers. This is it. Verse 23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said.

[26 : 29] When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Guess what their prayer begins with? Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant our father David. When the world's in turmoil, when your life's in turmoil, when the nation's in turmoil, the worst thing you can do is to give up on the idea of God's sovereignty.

In the face of a world seemingly out of control, the church in Acts chapter 4 turned to the God who is in control and trusted him even though it might seem that he wasn't in control.

God is sovereign, irrespective of whether or not you or I can see the evidence of it right now. Faith means holding on to God even when we don't feel like it.

Remember Job? I can't think of a more calamitous life scenario than Job's. Lost his wealth, lost his flocks, lost his family.

[27 : 48] The only thing he didn't lose was his wife and she wasn't much help was she? You know what her advice to Job was? She said to Job, listen, why don't you give up on God and curse him?

Some would say that was a bad marriage. So finally, and briefly, here are three things you need to do.

James chapter 4 and verse 8, come close to God and God will come close to you. James goes on, wash your hands you sinners, purify your hearts for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

Does that speak to you? Purify your hearts. Your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

Listen, we need in this time of turmoil, we need to redouble our efforts to trust in God and live as though we're trusting in God.

[28 : 54] In the idea, there is this idea of the faithful remnant. The people who hang on in there with God, even when their world is falling apart.

Friends, that's what God wants from you right now. That we will form a faithful remnant. I was talking with Tim Simpson before the service and he told me the most moving thing, a wonderful example of what I'm talking about.

He said that he had seen some video clip on social media of Muslims and Christians meeting together.

Go ahead. Sorry, Arab and Jewish believers meeting together. See, that's what I call a faithful remnant.

Sure, Tim wouldn't mind me telling you this, but when he saw that, he had a God moment.

Suddenly, I guess he saw something that in the current tragedy is very difficult to see.

[30 : 11] We need to be that faithful remnant, friends. you find this in the prophets, but you find it very graphically, don't you, in the story of Jonah.

Genesis chapter 7, God sees the sin in the world and decides, this is what God says to himself, I've had enough of this, and I've had enough of these people, I'm going to wipe them out.

And it just tells us in Genesis chapter 7, this amazing one word, one sentence phrase, Noah was a righteous man.

Noah was a righteous man. Do you know what God's looking for church? He's looking for righteous men and women who will trust him and live like they trust him.

second thing for you to take home today is remember without being complacent, in the end it will all come right.

[31 : 21] It will all come right. That's the prophecy of Daniel in chapter 7, in the end the son of man will come and that shouldn't lead us to complacency.

That's the message of Daniel, amazingly, predicted hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth. So live the life that God calls you to.

Don't be half-hearted. Don't be divided in your loyalty between God and the world. Step it up. I want to say, sorry this is a cheap advertisement, but I do want to say you could start it up by making a decision to come to the prayer meeting that will be held I think next Monday being the first Monday in the month.

Am I right, Susie? You could come along to that and pray for this turmoil that we find ourselves in. That would cost you an hour of your time.

It might mean you would miss EastEnders. What is your faith worth? Remember, without being complacent, it will be all right.

[32 : 40] Jesus said in John 14, if you love me, you will obey my commandments. I will ask the Father and he will give you another helper who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit who reveals the truth about God.

I pray, friends, that God will reveal the truth about himself to us, about his majesty, about his glory, about his sovereignty. And finally, always remember that all we see happening, as I've said, is predicted in Holy Scripture.

Whatever we may feel, God is still in control. Remember, without becoming complacent, it will be all right.

I saw a man, I don't know if he was Muslim, Christian, I don't know what he was, Jewish, whatever, and he was saying something that I'd not heard anybody else say in all the broadcast footage that we've seen in the past weeks about the terrible situation in the Middle East.

He said, in the end, I believe that good will come out of this. He said, so much pain and so much blood cannot be shed without there being a good ending.

[34 : 12] I have hope, he said. I have no idea of the religious statement to that guy, but I bless him for what he said, in a world of turmoil and helplessness and hopelessness.

I don't know whether he felt his revelation was from God, but certainly, friends, don't forget, while there's a God in heaven and there are faithful people on earth, we need not lose hope.

Why don't we pray? Why don't we pray? Oh my gosh, Lord, there's such a lot to take in.

A lot in the world around us, a lot in our lives. Father, I pray for people in the house today who feel without hope, who are in danger of giving up.

Lord, would you please reveal the truth about yourself to them? Father, I pray for those in the house who agree with the words that I have spoken but still know that they are divided between loyalty to you, Father, and loyalty to the things of this world.

[35 : 35] Holy Spirit, would you please convict us of our sin? Father, and Father, with Jean who prayed earlier for the terrible turmoil, Lord, we pray that you would raise up men and women of peace who would speak into these situations that we've talked about.

And Lord, some of them will no doubt lose their lives for speaking in such a way. And Lord, finally we pray as your word would bid us.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come. Come in the grace and power of your Holy Spirit.

Come into our lives, Lord, and set us on fire with love for you and for the world that you sent your son to die for and that you love that much.

So, Father, we want to, Lord, in the words of Jack D, we pray that we might go away from here and think about what's happened this morning.

[36 : 59] Lord, that we might not just know about the faithful remnant, but that, Lord, we might be part of it. And we pray these things in Jesus' name and to his amazing glory and the people who

agreed said together in a loud voice, Amen.