

Sermon: 2020/03/29 (5th Sunday in Lent) - Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; & John 11:1-45_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Disassembled cardboard skeleton; stapler.]

The prophet Ezekiel had the bad *luck* of living at a time when what was left of old David's kingdom was being "swallowed" up by the Empire of Babylon. He, in fact, was one of the many *thousands* taken in captivity *away* from his home. But God's mission for him to Speak Truth continued *even* in that foreign country to which he was taken.

And it was during that Exile that Ezekiel was given, one night, a strange vision by God:

a dream.

In it, he saw himself "scooped up," out of his bed, and flown to a lonely, desolate, *silent* valley in the desert.

Nothing moved.

And the ground was covered in human bones!

[Show to camera.]

(Not actual ones, mind: they were symbolic.)

The "symbolic" bones of the miserable, disgraced Jewish people who, like Ezekiel, were now living in squalor among the Babylonians.

And Ezekiel *cried out* in despair:

"Can *these* dry bones live?!" He asked God, incredulously.

[Start stapling bones together.]

And, by way of an answer, suddenly, the bones which were scattered all around (at his feet) began to come together to form bodies.

One-by-one.

And to these rebuilt skeletons God added organs and nerves and muscles, until the Jews were *whole* again, and healthy;
a *nation* once more.

This was a sign of things to come; a sign which was to give them confidence - *hope*.

That no matter *how* dark or bleak a situation is, with God's help it can be transformed; *reversed*.

Let's pray:
Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

Today, I want us to think about a *terribly* important concept - one perhaps that you don't *normally* give much thought to, which is... the sovereignty of God. I think what's taking place around us - this bleak situation with "Corona" - demands it; *this* conversation. But what does that mean? - "The sovereignty of God."

Well, in politics a person or a country is "sovereign" in that geography; that territory where what they want and desire is *The Law*.

It is that realm or region where that person or country's *design*; their... *will* is supreme;

supreme and uncontested.

So, take the Pope, for example.

He is *sovereign* of the Vatican City:

the Vatican City, which is an *entirely* independent state with a seat at the U. N.

It "sits" in the middle of Rome, yes - just a few square-blocks; yet it has its own government; its own police-force; even an "army" - that is, the Swiss guards.

And in this tiny, *tiny* "slice" of the Italian peninsula the Pope is, quite literally, the king.

What he says others *must* do.

Here, he alone gives the orders and make commands.

And no one else can overrule him.

Now, *outside* of Vatican City the Pope is extremely influential - or certainly *has* been in previous centuries.

The leaders of other nations sought his advice and guidance, and, in this way, extended to him a lot of *power* in many far, flung places.

But, "at the end of the day," if those other, Catholic leaders - of "those far, flung places" - didn't like what the Pope recommended or decreed, they could ignore it; they could dismiss it.

And he couldn't *force* them to obey.

Thus, we can say that the Pope was sovereign *only* up to the borders; the "extremities" of the Vatican City.

His sovereignty, in other words, is circumscribed there; it is a force to be reckoned with(!), but it is *finite*.

But what about God's sovereignty, then?

The "*King of kings*." [3 Mac. 5:35]

Who sits on a throne at the center of the universe?

Some are inclined to say that since God is unqualifiedly omnipotent - this is the Biblical witness - *everything*, therefore, that happens must do so because He *wanted* it to.

That only in *this* way is God sovereign.

But is that true?

If this is your *theology*, then widespread sickness and panic, a collapsing economy and sudden mass unemployment - which is what we're seeing right now - must be divinely *intentioned*.

A direct outworking of His *plan*.

And the internet at the moment is *full* of people, well-meaning people, offering justifications as to why our Heavenly Father has *purposefully* sent Covid-19 against the peoples of the world.

As if He [point upward] were like some hostile country, which deploys its soldiers on a battlefield to exert or impose its sovereignty over and against another. Like the Soviets did with their tanks in Hungary in '56, for example.

But I think the incident with Lazarus problematizes such an overblown interpretation of God's sovereignty.

That is to say, I think a "deterministic" view of God's sovereignty - where He alone is "pulling *all* the strings" - is an unjustified exaggeration of how He in fact *exercises* it.

In particular, I see in the words, "Jesus began to weep" [Jn. 11:35] - which form the shortest verse in Scripture - evidence for a *starkly* different view of the way in which God goes about being "sovereign."

Consider: Jesus is the *perfect* reflection; our best and most accurate portrait of the otherwise mysterious creator: [2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3a].

Because He is Him incarnated. [Phil. 2:7]

Flesh and blood.

Breathing and living.

And He - Jesus - was spending time evangelising and preaching in Israel when that ministry was *suddenly* interrupted by a plea; this...anguished outcry for Him to perform a miracle for an acquaintance who was 'ill' (in the village of Bethany): [Jn. 11:2b, 3b, 6a].

(So, this is *highly* pertinent, topical stuff.)

He was 'ill', this man, "Lazarus," and the condition became so serious that he died. And Jesus, seeing all this distress and misery 'began', as we see; as I've said, 'to weep'.

And my question to you is: "Would He have wept (in that way) if it had been His *plan* - as God - for this to have happened? [Pause.]

Let's engage in a thought experiment:

let's say I laid a trap for you.

Let's say that I *knew* you were in your home, practicing neighbourly "social distancing," keeping yourself to yourself; and I crept into your garden.

And I dug a dark hole, *much* deeper than a (grown) man is tall, and placed some sharpened stakes at the bottom, upright and rigid.

Lethal.

And let's say that I did this *directly* between your backdoor and your shed - your shed where you keep an expensive and beloved lawnmower, family photos in boxes, a few heirlooms, and so on.

And over this "hole," which is right in the path, as I say, from your house to the shed - "as the crow flies," I lay a thin cover of turf, stretched out like a fragile drum-skin, disguising its presence.

And then, finally, let's say that I set fire to your shed.

A big, bright, gasoline-fuelled, eye-catching fire.

What do you do?

Well, you rush out with a bucket of water from the kitchen and...*whoosh! Ouch.*

Down you go into the hole to your death.

In other words, I *killed* you.

I took control of the various variables that exist, and I orchestrated a situation to cause you to die.

And then, having done that, let's say I emerged from my hiding place, wander over to where you've fallen into the hole that I dug, onto the stakes-like-knives that I cut and arranged, and I 'wept'.

What would an onlooker say?

To me?

About my weeping.

Would you say that my "weeping" was sincere?

Would you say it was...*real*?

Or would you call the police?

And maybe make another call to the "men in white" with the upholstered van and the straight-jackets?

I'm sorry for this gruesome R-rated image I've described, but what I'm trying to illustrate; to *illuminate* is a tentative answer to the "*terribly* important theological" question with which we're "grappling," about the fact that John describes Jesus as having "wept" at the entrance to Lazarus' sealed tomb; at his grave-side:

And this "*terribly* important *theological* point" emerges too, by the way, by Jesus' weeping on other occasions - such as from the hilltop when He viewed Jerusalem in Luke's gospel,

and foresaw that the majority of the population there, enthralled as they were by the Sadducees and the Temple-cult, would fail to accept Him as the Messiah,

and condemn themselves by crying out for His crucifixion.

Jesus' weeping exposes something that we need to hear about the reality of things at this time of pandemic and pandemonium.

Which is that - and hear me - God does not *will* for bad things to happen to *anybody*: [see 1 Tim. 2:3b-4a & Mt. 5:45; etc.].

It is *not* His *plan* that certain, *specific* people should suffer from Corona.

Yes, He created the conditions in which such a thing has occurred.

Yes, bacteria and the like are part of his 'very good' creation, though the why may elude us.

Yes, He *permits* some to - like Lazarus - become unwell and to die - and this is a quandary itself worth pondering. (But perhaps one that is explicable: and I encourage you to look into the work of the British philosopher, Richard Swinburne. There's a link in the video-description: [n.1].)

But *permitting* something (to happen) isn't the same as *planning* or desiring it. Don't confuse them.

Those concepts - planning and permitting - are *many* "miles" apart.

And from this morning's episode I think we see - *clearly* see - that God does *not* "plan" any person's particular fortunes (of lack of them).

That is to say, He does *not* ordain *every* event.

Indeed, I think that what the (Holy) Scriptures reveal is that He ordains merely those *few* events, which are *essential* for moving humanity and history to its grand conclusion of the General Resurrection and Final Judgement.

And if He *did* plan each and every event including Lazarus' illness and death, He would *not* weep (for sadness) when such transpired.

Those are mutually exclusive behaviors for a morally perfect and trustworthy God.

In other words, God is no puppet-master.

He is *in charge*, though; have *no* doubt of that.

Every moment, *every* breath is one that He *allows* to take place.

He is holding the world in existence: [Heb. 1:3b].

But being "in charge" is not the same as controlling; as...*dictating*; as...micro-managing.

I, for example, am "in charge" of Poppy, (as her parent).

It is in my strength and in power to intervene and restrain her whenever and wherever I wish.

And it is my prerogative to do so.

But, apart from certain, *extreme* circumstances, I *choose*, more often than the contrary, not to.

For what sort of life; what sort of existence would it be if she couldn't move or think for herself, and even to make some - *minor* - mistakes.

And this - the chance of "mistakes" and accidents - opens Poppy and my

relationship to some conflict; to some emotional "turbulence" - even to "weeping."
For a scratched knee, or a bloody elbow.
And this is *exactly* what we see in Jesus' tears for Lazarus.
The tears of a father for His hurting child.
Not the cold indifference of a chess-player for a pawn.

We have, then, what "pawns" *obviously* don't.
A genuine, *intrinsic* capacity to *act*;
to *truly* make a difference to our reality
- to alleviate and improve what faces America right now, for example; or,
conversely, to contribute to the problem.
To make *choices* that *actually* effect - better, hopefully - the fate of anxious,
fearful, perhaps 'ill' neighbors and strangers.
We share this capacity with God who gave us it;
He shares, you see, His sovereignty with us - this is precisely the meaning in
Genesis [chp.] one where He commissioned Adam to have "dominion." [v.26 & 28]
What an exciting opportunity God has *permitted*, then:
For *extraordinary* good by you and me; "extraordinary good" that, by the power
and help of the Holy Spirit, can *easily* overwhelm any *temporary*, momentary evil
such as the damage done by a virus.

Footnotes:

1. See: *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford University Press - https://www.amazon.com/dp/0198237987/ref=cm_sw_r_cp_tai_t.NFEbHGF1GDQ.
Alternatively: <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~baldner/swinburnwhygodallowsevil.pdf>