

“The Sovereignty of God” preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 7 February 2021 by Jordan Redding.

I.

Today, on this Waitangi weekend, I want to talk about God as sovereign. What does it mean to say God is sovereign? We might think of a sovereign as an absent monarch, ruling from afar. But Isaiah and Mark would disagree with this image of God. God exercises sovereignty as one deeply involved, sustaining this world.

I have a confession to make: I'm not much of a gardener. I don't so much garden as wrestle with my plants, trying to assert my dominance and beat them into submission. And yet I can't help but feel it's a losing battle! The wet summer we've been having is resulting in an abundance of life. Weeds are sprouting up from every crack and crevice. My cabbages, which I thought I planted far enough apart, are now vying for space like three fully-grown men, man-spreading in the back-seat of a car. I don't trust the pumpkins. Their long, thorny tendrils are always creeping, creeping. I'm scared I might wake up one night with one of the tendrils strangling me in my sleep. And that's to say nothing of the hordes of convolvulus constantly threatening to invade! The thin fence separating my garden from the invading hordes doesn't stand a chance. I'm constantly amazed by the abundant growth and life.

But even in harsher and inhospitable climates, like the arid, rocky land that covers much of ancient Israel, life is present, even thriving in innovative and ingenious ways. A couple of weeks ago, I was walking the Kepler, up Mt. Luxmore, above the tree-line. The hut ranger was showing us the various tussocks, mosses, hebes, fungi, and flowers, each of which has evolved to use the unforgiving weather to its advantage and even to thrive in these climates.

There is perhaps a note of hope here, when we consider our current ecological crisis. We talk a lot about climate change as an existential threat. And for human beings (and many thousands of species of flora and fauna) it's not an inaccurate description. We must do everything we can to mitigate its effects. Yet, I heard it said recently, that regardless of human action or inaction, the ecosystems of the world will heal themselves eventually. It might take a few ten-thousand years. Not even the awful destructive power of bottomless human greed can undo the insatiable thirst for life that is in the world around us, beneath us, above us. There is a fragile but irrepressible vivacity in the world that can't be quenched.

While science today tells us more and more about the mechanics of life and how this world works in all its complexity, it does not presume (or should not presume) to explain where this insatiable thirst for life comes from in the first place; and to what end or purpose. The why and wherefore of existence.

Isaiah saw the insatiable thirst for life in the world and saw in it a divine will. A divine intentionality in everything that exists. An eternal Word that creates and sustains all things in every moment in accordance with the unchanging and eternal will of the Creator. “The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of God will stand forever.”

John Calvin said similarly. He described this world as the “theatre of God’s glory”, *theatrum gloriae*. Why don’t we use phrases like that anymore? God’s glory, Calvin writes, “is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.” For Calvin, the whole created world in its fragile and miraculous beauty points beyond itself. It is sacramental, a visible sign, pointing to the incomprehensible, transcendent mystery of God.

Both Isaiah and Calvin are describing not only *that* God is sovereign, but *how* God is sovereign in our world. God is not sovereign like an absent queen, exercising power from over the oceans. In fact, it might be more helpful to think of God’s sovereignty as a verb. God is the One who sustains and nourishes all life, directing things towards their true end. To say God is sovereign is to say God is actively and intimately involved in this world; to see in the insatiable thirst for life a will or intentionality; that all things are geared towards life and not death; towards flourishing and not corruption; towards fullness and not nothingness.

II.

Isaiah goes further. He sees a deep and natural connection between the thirst for life in the world around us, and the thirst for life in human beings: call it a disposition towards hope; call it a yearning in human beings for justice, for freedom, for autonomy, for flourishing and peaceful existence. To wait on the Lord is, for Isaiah, to orient ourselves to the fullness of human existence as God’s intends and to be restored and strengthened in accordance with its coming.

Saint Paul uses the word *groaning*, the whole creation groans in labour pains as something new is being born. This new creation that God’s Spirit is bringing about.

We heard that same yearning in the words of Amanda Gorman, the young African-American poet, who spoke at President Joe Biden’s inauguration. “The dawn is ours before we knew it,” she said. “Somehow we do it. Somehow we’ve witnessed a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.” That word *unfinished* says so much. She infers that there is a finish that lies ahead, an end, a goal they’re heading to, a fulfilment towards which the hopes of the American nation are oriented. The dawn is already rising. For Gorman, the light is ever present: we simply need to step out of the shade. The light cannot be extinguished. The insatiable thirst for life cannot be quenched.

We have heard the same song for decades in our own country. In 1984, Sir Justice Joe Williams released a song entitled *Maranga ake ai*, or “rise up again and again”. At the time, it caused a bit of a stir because of its evocative lyrics and anti-establishment tone. “There’s a movement, a movement on the street / people moving, they shuffle to the beat / I hear them talking, talking on the street / Where’s my freedom from oppression, cos’ that’s what my people need.” Like in Amanda Gorman’s poem, there’s a sense of movement *towards* something. There is a goal. The reggae beat is the music of a people on the move. Towards justice. Towards freedom. Towards life.

Isaiah and Calvin would point to God's sovereignty. God who is at work in everything sustaining, nourishing, fulfilling.

What we hear in Gorman and Williams is an ancient and recurring theme. We hear the same song in the words of Isaiah, who wrote to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. For Israel at the time, the sovereignty of Babylon, their power and dominance was so complete, that the people began to question God's faithfulness to them. God had abandoned them to the hands of their oppressors. Isaiah seeks to settle and comfort. God's sovereignty is no abstract doctrine of a God ruling from afar. These words of praise to God are the source of pastoral comfort in the midst of deep uncertainty. Isaiah directs the people's attention beyond their immediate situation towards the stars and the magnitude of the universe stretched out like a canvas, a tent in which all things live and move and have their being. Isaiah extols the *glory* of God. In the light of such glory, even the rulers of the earth are like grasshoppers. Even the empire of Babylon will rise and fall like a garden plant.

III.

One can hardly avoid the geopolitical and social implications of Isaiah's message. The sovereignty of God is a direct challenge to the power of those who exercise sovereignty over others. Wherever life is diminished, wherever freedom is taken away, wherever the autonomy and rights of another are not recognised, God's Spirit is working to bring about justice, renewing, strengthening. It's hard to hear those words on Waitangi weekend, without drawing connections to our own situation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We are a treaty people, a covenant people, committed to reconciliation, and to equal partnership. There is an increasing recognition of this in principle. In practice however we hear time and again that it's not the case, that the sovereignty of Māori as equal, covenant partners is not recognised.

With regard to land, to waterways, to culture, to language, to people. In recent times, we can think of Ihumatao; the controversies surrounding Oranga Tamariki; the poor conditions of Waikeria prison, the inmates of which are disproportionately Māori and Pāsifika; in just the last few days the question of Māori representation on regional councils and the formation of Māori wards has been raised. Māori are saying again and again that they are not represented and their interests are not being upheld.

The word "sovereignty" is perhaps one of the most contentious in New Zealand today because it gets to the heart of the mistranslation of the Treaty. In Article One, the English version gives the Queen of England "all rights and powers of sovereignty". The reo version uses the word *Kāwanatanga*, perhaps best translated "governorship". The problem is that sovereignty is perhaps most accurately translated "*rangatiratanga*" or "*mana*", something the Māori chiefs would never have ceded to the Queen of England. In fact, in the reo of Article Two, which talks about land possession, Māori explicitly maintain *rangatiratanga* over their land, villages, and taonga. You can see where the misunderstanding arose. A misunderstanding that is continuing to have an effect today.

IV.

Where do we even begin? How do we step out of the shade? The practicalities are so complex and large. As a Pākehā, I seek to be well informed but I can never know what it means to be Māori in Aotearoa today, nor would I presume to know what the solutions might look like.

We might begin, as followers of Jesus, to look to how God exercises sovereignty and to witness to that with words and with actions. In our gospel reading today, we see God's sovereignty in the world begins small and intimate. God undermines the powers of the world not through revolution and military might, but through the small and apparently insignificant. Jesus, who ministers with the authority and power of the sovereign God, enters into the home of a sick woman, in a small fishing town, in rural Galilee, on the edges of the Roman Empire. And *there* heals her, restores her dignity, enables her and empowers her to act as host to Jesus and his guests. This work of restoration, of giving life, begins in the intimacy of the home. By evening Jesus steps out into the street and the city gathers around. And the next morning Jesus heads throughout all Galilee and eventually to Jerusalem. It's the inner logic of our gospel passage today and indeed of God's sovereign power in the world.

There is a challenge in this for us. God's sovereign action involves you and me and our daily interactions. In Aotearoa, you and I are all treaty partners, called to partner with one another, protect the taonga of one another, and participate in the work of reconciliation together. We don't need changes at the national level to begin this mahi.

But there is also comfort in the knowledge that it is not up to us. God is sovereign, creating and sustaining all things and bringing all things by the Spirit to their true end in the fullness of time. As Amanda Gorman says, "May we learn to lift our gaze above what stands between us to what stands before us." Amen.

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