

GOD OUR SOVEREIGN

(Romans 11.33-36)

If you are a guest or here for the first time today, I want to extend a special welcome to you. It is great to have you here and I hope you feel at home.

On 12 August 2016 I had the privilege and honour of conducting Maggie and Joe's wedding right here in this church.

I have to say, I have rarely seen a more radiant bride, a more delighted groom and, if I can say this, a more emotional bride's father. It was quite a day. And it's wonderful to see that Maggie and Joe have been busy since their wedding day! Welcome to little Jack.

It was clear for all to see on 12 August two years ago that Maggie and Joe had met the love of their lives. It's just written all over their faces, isn't it?

But how do you *know* when you have met the love of your life? How can you tell if he or she is *the one*?

Listen to this true story told by a young man called Mark.

He says, I couldn't stop thinking about Esther. My spirit soared at the sight of her. We laughed whenever we were together. But, I don't know. Should I really invite her to dinner on Friday and ask her to be my girlfriend? What if she doesn't like me? It'll be pretty awkward eating dessert together...

While on my lunch break, as I was thinking about this, I went for a sandwich and as I was about to pay, I glanced at the £5 note in my hand. Something was written on it. I took a closer look.

It was the word "Esther." What were the chances? Could this be a sign?! I paid with another bank note and, heading back to the office, I had an idea. I went into a shop, bought a small picture frame and put the note inside. I'll invite Esther out on Friday night, I thought, and if she agrees to be my girlfriend, I'll give her this framed banknote.

That Friday, Esther told me she'd love to be my girlfriend. And as we basked in the glow of our new relationship, (quick status update on Facebook...) I pushed a box of pretty wrapped paper across the table. "I have a present for you" I said.

Aw, how sweet, said Esther. She tore off the paper, opened the box, held up the frame and stared at it.

Yeah, it was the craziest thing I said, telling her how I had discovered that £5 note. But she just kept staring at it. Finally, she looked back at me – but not with a smile. She appeared shocked, even confused. It definitely wasn't the reaction I was hoping for.

I thought she'd laugh. But she slipped the frame into her handbag. She seemed so out of sorts I didn't dare to press her about it.

Anyway, about two years later, we were married and moving into a new flat together. While unpacking, I came across that framed £5 note. I didn't even know she'd kept it.

Hey, you never told me about this, I said. You acted really strangely when I gave it to you. What was that about? This time, as Esther took the frame, she smiled.

Here's the story, she said. A few years before we met, I was working as a cashier at a printing shop. It was a slow day, I was bored, and I started thinking, how do you know when you've met the love of your life? And I had an idea. I wrote my name 'Esther' on a £5 note and I gave it out the next time I had to give change. And I said a prayer that somehow that £5 note would end up with the man I would go on to marry!

I love that story because, well, everyone loves a romance with a happy ending, but also because it reminds me of how amazing God is.

What were the chances of that £5 note, of all the bank notes in the country, ending up with the man Esther would marry and who would actually give it back to her framed, without knowing? But that was Esther's prayer and God heard it and answered it.

This morning's theme, as we look over these few weeks at the attributes of God, is "God our Sovereign." That means he's the king. He rules and he reigns. Nothing is too hard for him. Nothing takes him by surprise. He has no rival, and no equal.

As our second reading says, "Oh, the *depth* of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! From him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever!"

God is sovereign and almighty and awesome and majestic - but he doesn't sit aloof and at a distance, arms folded, and blame us when we drift away from him. He doesn't wash his hands of us when we mess up, saying that we're just too much trouble. When we are a long way from where we know we should be, he goes out to find us.

About a hundred years ago, an American missionary called William Young took the gospel to the tribes of East Burma. He learned the language and one day he was preaching in a marketplace.

And as he preached, some men at the edge of the crowd from the Lahu tribe pushed their way to the front. And overflowing with emotion they said, "We've been waiting for you for centuries. We have prophecies that tell us that a white man will come with a book from God, and will set us free.

We have even built meeting places ready for you to come. You must come with us now." Then they showed him bracelets that they wore. They said, "We Lahu have worn these rope bracelets since time immemorial. They are placed on us at birth. They symbolise our bondage to evil.

And we know that you alone as the messenger of the one God can cut these from our wrists, when you have brought us the message from the book of the one creator God. In 1904, William Young baptized 2,200 Lahu tribespeople. In the next few years after that he baptized another 60,000.

In our baptism liturgy earlier, I said, "We all wander far from God and lose our way: Jesus comes to find us and welcomes us home."

Like the shepherd of 100 sheep who notices that one is missing, and who goes out of his way to look for it and find it. This is what God is like. A king who knows every one of his subjects personally.

We stress over things we lose – or might lose. A wallet or keys or travellers' cheques. Or, more seriously, our job or the house, or our health. But the most precious thing we can lose is our own soul – to be far from God and not know the way back.

I hope and pray that Jack will grow up knowing that God loves him and is for him. He is too young to understand this now. But when he gets a little older, and becomes more aware of spiritual things, he will *have* to make a spiritual decision for himself – like we do as adults; yes or no, for or against. Because his baptism doesn't make him a Christian; it brings him into the community of faith but he will have to decide for himself one day whether he wants to stay or leave.

Your job as parents and godparents and our job as the church here at Saint Mary's is to do all we can to help Jack make the right choice. Let's pray for him, love him, tell him how amazing God is and how much Jesus loves him.