

The God who Knows Me - Psalm 139

Sermon 1-10-23 (Sarah Butler)

What is your favourite piece of scripture, I was asked. Impossible question! At different times of my life, God has spoken through words of different parts of the Bible that are just right for me at that particular time.

When I was younger and didn't know the Bible so well, I sometimes used to open it randomly and see what I could find. Very often, I would come upon the Psalms, perhaps because they are more or less in the middle of the book. When I was a teenager, I came upon that phrase from Psalm 42 where the writer says "Why are you so downcast O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God." That spoke to me. That was how I was feeling: downcast, restless.

The Psalms speak of every human emotion. At another time, when in deep distress, I clung to Psalm 23 praying that God would "lead me beside quiet waters, and restore my soul." I'm not sure exactly when Psalm 139 came into my life, but I cherish it, for the way it helps me to see my life through the lens of God's love and care for me. It speaks of the God who knows me.

It's a kind of meditation where the writer, possibly David, is in a state of awe and wonder as he thinks about the relationship he has with God. The more he thinks about it, the more wonderful it seems. Have you ever had that sense of wonder? I was holidaying in Cumbria about a month ago and some of us went out into the garden of the place where we were staying, at night. As our eyes adjusted, we began to see more and more stars. More than we would have seen at home, where there is too much light pollution. Some people lay down on the ground and looked up. After a little while, they all suddenly cried out in astonishment because they had seen a really bright shooting star. They couldn't stop saying "That was amazing!". Scientists and astronomers are constantly scanning the skies to learn more about our universe. Many are saying that it is only a question of time before other forms of life are discovered. What are the implications of this for humans? One has commented, "If we find signs of life it will be a revolution in science and it is also going to be a massive change in the way humanity looks at itself and its place in the universe."

That takes us into the realms of ideas that boggle my mind! But for me at least, whatever is discovered, God will still be God, and like the Psalm writer, I find it astonishing that the God who created everything should have such a tender concern for each one of us.

The psalm writer is filled with wonder, that God's knowledge of him is not just a vague knowledge that he exists, but a very detailed one. He starts: *O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely O Lord.*

God knows him completely. He has seen things in him that no-one else has seen. You might think, this is pretty scary. We can't hide anything from God. Sometimes we might want to hide from him, because we expect a challenge or because we might be afraid that God will ask us to do something we don't want to do.

Other characters in the Bible have had a similar experience. Jonah was given a job to do, but ran off in the opposite direction. But God never lost sight of him, even when he was swallowed by a big fish.

Job, on the other hand, the man who was stripped of his wealth, his health and everything that made life worth living, looked everywhere for God, but couldn't find him. God seemed so far away. And yet, he concludes that *God sees him*. “. . . if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.”

In contrast, the writer of Psalm 139 says, God is *everywhere*. In fact, it is impossible *not* to be in his presence. “If I go up to the heavens you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” And for him, this is wonderful! *You have laid your hand upon me* v5 he says. To say that God has his hand upon your life is the opposite of believing in fate, or chance. His future is not “written in the stars”, as some might say, but in the mind of a loving and merciful God.

We can't hide from God, but that's a good thing, because to hide is almost the same as being lost. If you're lost, no-one knows where you are. The only good thing about the game of hide-and-seek is that someone will eventually find you. If everyone went away and played something else, we'd find the isolation of our hidey-hole unbearable. Even if we are in a very dark place, where it is difficult even for our friends to reach us, God is there. (V12) *Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

So, the fact that God knows us, and we are always under his gaze is not something to fear. The psalmist says “You hem me in - behind and before” v5. Rather than being hemmed in, in the sense of being constrained or restricted, I see this as a picture of God with his arms out lest we fall, as you would with a small child learning to walk and you don't know which way they're going to wobble. God is there waiting to catch us.

The writer says God has this knowledge of him, throughout the whole of his life. Even before his birth and in the womb, God knew all about him. It makes him think what a wonderful creature a human is. “*When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, Your eyes saw my unformed body.*” (v15)

Formed in the earth, as a part of God's creation, just as, in Genesis, Adam was made from the dust of the ground. God, the craftsman or perhaps craftswoman – knitting together, weaving, making.

But then in the middle of this reverie, there's a sudden outburst in verses 19-22, where he says, in effect, ‘I just wish you would slay the wicked and get rid of my enemies’. In some ways it doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the Psalm. On the other hand, it shows that he isn't afraid to share his feelings with God, because God *knows* his every thought anyway. Yes, he does have enemies – those who are opposed to God.

Sometimes he has violent or sinful thoughts and it's no good pretending they don't exist. But instead of wondering “Is it wrong to feel like this?” he asks God to search his heart and to lead him into right thinking and acting.

He ends by opening himself up to God and saying: "See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong – then guide me on the road to eternal life." We can be ourselves with God; we don't have to pretend.

Hopefully, as we grow older, we know ourselves better. But the important thing is that God knows us. I find that really comforting. We need someone who really knows us, without having to explain everything. In fact, God knows me better than I know myself. He knows what makes me tick: my thoughts, my words, my actions. And if we ever doubted this, we have only to look at Jesus and the way he knew people.

Not only does Jesus know what it's like to be human because he has lived here among us, but we see from the Gospels how he spoke to people as individuals. He knew what was in people's hearts, he knew his disciples: who would betray him, who would be faithful, who would be a good leader, who would be the best person to look after his mother. He spoke tenderly to those who needed kind words and sternly to those who needed to be challenged. He knows the things that limit us and cause us frustration. He knows the abilities and skills we have and what we are each capable of.

If this is a new Psalm for you, or even if you know it well, I encourage you to re-read it and to let it teach you. God knows your past, your present and your future. He has his hand upon your life. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are unique and he loves you. You can never be lost to him. He will always come and find you.

It is a relationship like no other. Although God knows us, we can only know a tiny part of him, as he graciously reveals things to us. But one day we will know more.

For, as St Paul says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."