

Do you ever write poetry? I never have at least not since I was at school. I'm sure I had to then but can't remember. But if you did write poetry and, as a Christian, wrote a poem about God I wonder what it would look like?

I say this because as we come to Psalm 139 in the last of this series on 'Psalms you should know' we need to recognise what this Psalm is if we are to appreciate it.

First off this Psalm is a poem and we need to read it as a poem so not in the way we might read a New Testament letter. Secondly it was written by a person of faith and very possibly by David who was king of Israel.

It is a personal poem describing not doctrine and theology but one man's faith, his relationship with God, As we go through it and see something of how David understood his God I'm sure it will ring bells with us in part but then challenge us in others.

1. My God understands me v1-6

The first thing the Psalmist says is that his God knows him inside out. We are all aware of the joke of the man sitting talking to the barman saying "my wife doesn't understand me" but the Psalmist would say not so with God.

The God of the Psalmist knows what he does, "you know when I sit and when I rise" (v2); knows what he thinks, "you perceive my thoughts" (v2); and knows not just what he says but what he is going to say "before a word is on my tongue you know it completely" (v4).

I think the latter we would recognise as a sign of understanding. When you know a person well enough to know what they will say about something or can finish their sentence for them.

The point the Palmist is making about his God is there in v1 "O Lord you have searched me and you know me". Or as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 13:12 "then I shall know fully even as I am fully known." Here we see the essence of what the Psalmist was describing in that there is an unequal relationship between God and his children.

Paul was saying God from the beginning fully knows and understands us but for us our knowledge and understanding of him is poor and will continue to be imperfect until we see him face to face. But that was not the worry for the Psalmist because for him the amazing thing was that God understood him God knew everything about him and..... v5 "you hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand on me".

I wonder how you read the phrase "you hem me in"? Is it a negative or a positive? Is he feeling threatened or heartened? I wonder how you see it? As a writer puts it, "so long as I am looking to my own self-pleasing and away from God, I shall feel his knowledge of me as a threat. As soon as I turn from sin and back to him it becomes a comfort."

I think the phrase you have laid your hand on me suggests the latter. I'm sure many of us have had the experience of picking up a sticky, smelly small child and in love holding them to us with the result

that the child might feel “hemmed in” but also knows they are deeply loved no matter what their situation. God knows us, he understands us fully and completely and yet he loves us and has “laid his hand on us” (v5) in terms of calling us to be his children through Jesus. No wonder the Psalmist says in v6 “such knowledge is too wonderful for me.” I hope we do have sufficient understanding of God to know that he loves us and loves us deeply even though he knows us completely.

2, My God is there for me v7-12

As we read these verses we might again think they can be either negative or positive. As we look at v11, “If I say, “surely the darkness will hide me” we might think the Psalmist is wanting to hide away from God. Perhaps there are times for all of us when in one sense we wish we could hide from God. The question of the Psalmist is “where can I flee from your presence?”

If we view this negatively then we know that there are indeed times when we either have or do seek to flee from God.

Francis Thompson failed in his attempts to become a Roman Catholic Priest, a doctor and a soldier. He ended up lost in London until a Christian couple recognised his poetic genius and rescued him. Throughout these years he was conscious of both pursuing God and being pursued by him and expressed it in his famous poem ‘The Hound of Heaven.’ The poem begins:

I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;

Many of us may have had that sense of being pursued by God and fleeing from him until in the end we realise there is no escape and commit our lives to Jesus. Friends if you find yourself in that situation today knowing that God is asking you to come to him and give your life to him but you are running away then see what the Psalmist says v7 “where can I go from your Spirit?” The answer here is there is nowhere we can escape to so submit to him.

But there are other ways we seek to flee from God. Jonah later in the Old Testament hoped he could run away from God because what God was asking of him seemed too hard. I have certainly heard of Christians who sensing what God was calling them to do have tried to avoid it but to no avail. It may be that for some of us here this morning or listening on download that we know God is calling us to some task and we are trying to find a way out. Please don't the eternal God is God and his will for us is perfect.

Also when we are being disobedient to God and being sinful then we might wish to hide from God. I have a memory of reading the Just William books with my children and in one William Brown has had a bad report from school and he knows that if his father sees it he will end up doing lessons

through the summer holidays. The story is about him trying to hide the offending article but failing miserably. We can't hide from God and we cannot hide our sins from God. As we have seen he knows our actions, our thoughts and our words.

But, having said all that, the Psalmist seems to be saying that he is appreciative of a God who is always there, as we see in v10, "even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." Frequently in the Psalms and elsewhere God's right hand is the symbol of his power so Psalm 20:6 "Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand."

I just think that is a great image isn't it? "Your right hand will hold me fast". I remember when our children were little and we were living in the centre of London the bedrooms were downstairs rather than up. In the morning having woken the children I would follow them upstairs for breakfast. Anna by then about three or four would have the somewhat alarming habit of suddenly falling backward expecting me to catch her. Fortunately she had not seen me play cricket. It was a matter of faith of trusting that I was there and would hold her. This is what the Psalmist was saying here. Wherever I am, wherever I go God is there and he is there for me. As it says in Deut 33:27 "The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms".

The Psalmist knew he was safe because his God was there for him.

Last Sunday Matthew Sleeman was encouraging us from Psalm 119:11 where it says, "I have hidden your word in my heart" to plant or bury God's word in our heart so it can flourish and nourish us and v10 "your right hand will hold me fast" is such a verse. God taking us by the hand and giving us a sense of security in the face of the things that worry us. Will you do that? Will you take these words "your right hand will hold me fast" and plant them in your mind and heart and trust them when you are as it were falling backwards downstairs if you see what I mean.

God's power is for his children. He will hold us fast through the things that scare us in the week ahead. Wherever our path may take us this week he is there v5 "before and behind" us. We can trust him.

3. he is my God from beginning to end v13-16

V13 begins with a for and in a sense these verses carry on because what the Psalmist is saying is that even in his mother's womb he wasn't hidden from God. But the thing I want us to notice is there in v13 "for you created me". The Psalmist saw himself as a creature of God and what wonderful poetic language in these verses! "You knit me together", "woven together in the depths of the earth" where the earth represents his mother's womb.

The recognition of being part of God's creation brings out from the Psalmist at least two responses.

a. praise v14 "I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made". Isn't that great? He is not praising God for creation in general but for the creation of himself. "I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" the emphasis is upon the "I". It won't do to talk about each of us being a

unique creation though we are. The challenge for us is to look at ourselves, to recognise that God has made us and he has known us from our very conception and to praise him because I, because you, are fearfully and wonderfully made. Again I am not just talking about our bodies which for some of us we may not see as fearfully and wonderfully made through disability or something else. I am speaking of the totality of our being, of who we are. We are God created and yes because we live in a fallen world there are flaws but we are God created and as such we are wonderful. Is that not what it says? Yes it does v14 “your works are wonderful” and we are the works of God’s creation so we are wonderful. Tell yourself that when you get home and tell yourself that tomorrow morning! I am wonderful and then praise God for his creation.

b. submission which is there in v16, “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” The recognition that God not only has created us but he is God over our lives from beginning to end. The Psalmist acknowledges that it is God who is God and as such who rules over his life even to setting the length of his days. In many ways these words are a strong no to those who would seek to act as God and cut off life either at the beginning through abortion or at the end through euthanasia. Now I realise that we do not have time to explore those issues in full as we did when we ran the ethics course last year, but here we see God’s word presenting God as the one who is there at the beginning and end of our lives and who is God over all. The Psalmist makes it clear for us that our whole existence belongs to God not to ourselves. He is our creator our God. This is why he knows us because he has made us and this is why he is there for us because we are his creation to which he is committed.

Our response should be to submit to him as God because as our maker he knows what is best for our lives and so the best for us is to be moving in the same direction as God is leading us. This takes us back to the idea of trying to flee from God. I know Jonah is not a great example with his moaning and complaining but he found that to obey God’s will and go God’s way was a better option than pulling in the opposite direction. Paul’s account of his coming to faith in Acts 26 has Jesus saying to him “it is hard for you to kick against the goads.” (Acts 26:14) He was pulling away from God, fleeing the hound of heaven and it wasn’t working.

Friends what we are seeing is that God has made us, he knows us, he is there for us and he longs for us to walk with him holding as it were his strong right hand. That way is safety, comfort a peace.