

Psalm 139:1

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

Recently, one of my church-community was telling me about critical illness in the family

- She had been concerned for her daughter's husband's mother
- In other words her son-in-law's mother
- In the course of his work, her son-in-law had been visiting a customer's house
- And had been telling the customer of his family concerns
- The customer, a Christian, referred the family to the Bible
- It turns out that the customer was my uncle and scripture passage was Psalm 139
- Which all goes to show, the ripples of our Christian witness go further than we think

Psalm 139 is undoubtedly one of the greatest of the 150 Psalms in the Bible

- Some Bible commentators (Kidner) think that it is the greatest of all the Psalms
- But whether it is the greatest or not it is certainly one of the greatest
- I have divided the Psalm into four sections
- while the first three sections are mainly thanksgiving
- the fourth and final part (vv. 19-24)
- is in the form of a prayer during a time of distress

The main theme of the Psalm is that God knows and loves his people

- and that is great cause for thanksgiving
- and so I divide the four sections of the Psalm under four general headings

I YOU KNOW ME
II YOU SURROUND ME
III YOU MADE ME
IV YOU TEST ME

I YOU KNOW ME

The important thing to notice about this first section of the Psalm

- is that it is not about formal, religious observances
- today, millions of people will be going about formal, religious observances
- but the authentic faith of the Bible is not about formal, religious observances
- it is about a God whom we can know and a God who knows us
- the main theme of the Psalm is about God knowing us
- but we can offer a little aside about our knowing God

Biblical theology teaches that God is transcendent

- his being surpasses physical existence and is independent of it
- before the creation of the heavens and the earth – there was God
- after earth and the heavens have passed away – there will be God
- creator but separate from his creation – he is God
- God not only transcends the universe but transcends knowledge
- He is beyond the grasp of the human mind
- And everything that God wants us to know about his nature
- Is what he has chosen to reveal to us

The creator or artist may well reveal something of his nature in his work

- Is what he has chosen to reveal to us
- Music scholars debate as to how the personalities of great composers
- Are revealed in their music
- It does not seem possible to think that personality does not come through their craft

In another place, David the great poet-king exclaims:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

(Psalm 19:1-3)

We know, therefore, that something of the nature of God is revealed through creation

- We believe that God has spoken through the prophets
- But as the writer to Hebrews says, in one breathless sentence in the original

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Hebrews 1:1-3)

As far as the Christian is concerned, God can be known

- Through creation, through the scriptures and supremely in Jesus
- Of whose words and deeds we have a reliable record in the God given scriptures
- But the other side of the coin is that God knows us

It is because God knows us and supremely through Jesus we may know him

- That the Christian faith can never be formal, religious exercises
- Rather it should be an intensely personal relationship
- The relationship that we find that the heroes of the faith had in the scriptures

In Psalm 139 that is one of the Psalms attributed to David

- David comes to a realisation that God knows him completely
- 'O Lord, you have searched me and you know me'
- Kings were regarded as unsearchable to their subjects (Proverbs 25:3)
- But not to God – here, King David, Israel's great King is known by God
- The Lord knows his own, the Lord knows his every move
- The Psalm reads like a Thesaurus of synonyms for know
- God searches, knows, perceives, discerns and is familiar
- With his thoughts, his words, his actions
- We can only really guess what other people are thinking – but God knows
- He even knows what is going to be said before we say it

II YOU SURROUND ME

I wasn't quite sure of the NIV translation, 'you hem me in - behind and before' (v. 5)

- So I looked up the much praised English Standard Version which reads
- 'you hem me in – behind and before'
- Frustrated, I went to the Hebrew interlinear for a literal translation
- But that was no help – it offered 'bind up' or 'enclose'
- Still it wasn't resonating with me – David is clearly positive about this
- 'Enfold' might be a good translation – 'Surround' might be a good translation
- and that is the one I chose for the title of this point

Most of us can remember the days when continental quilts were foreign bedding

- when we had starched white cotton sheets, blankets and eiderdown
- and whether as parents or children, relished the tucking in process
- a good tucker-in could render the child almost immobile
- saved from the perils of cold or, worse still, falling out of bed
- despite being almost mummified in sheets and blankets
- this was universally regarded as a welcome process and feeling – 'tucked-in'
- so that's my offering – God tucks us in, behind and before and lays his hand on us
- the great divine judge is one in whom the Psalmist has found protection and blessing

Since I began my service as a Methodist preacher in 1979, I have kept an appointments diary

- before I was preacher, I didn't really feel the need to keep I diary
- if someone invited me out to tea on Thursday before the Bible study
- I was hardly likely to forget – Sunday was Sunday and that was it
- I could not function without my diary – but I also use it for other strange purposes
- Instead of using it to look forward, when I can't remember what I did yesterday
- I use it to look back – you would think that I could remember what I did yesterday
- But, of course, we all know what it is like to forget things, even about ourselves
- But God knows everything about us – such knowledge is too wonderful, too lofty
- Not even the greatest computer could master it but God knows it all

There are times in the Bible when we find men and women running away from God

- Or hiding from him
- After they had fallen into sin, Adam and Eve hid from God in the trees of the garden
- When he was commanded to preach in Nineveh
- Jonah ran away from the Lord and went to hide in Tarshish (Jonah 1:3)
- But this is not really a case of the Psalm writer trying to get away from God
- The questions, 'where can I go?', 'where can I flee?' are for emphasis
- In the height of the heavens or in the depths of the earth (God is there)
- The 'wings of the dawn' are the morning rays of the sun, familiar to us in
- The 'sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings' (Malachi 4:2)
- The Lord is not some local pagan deity – but the universal God of heaven and earth
- The heavens, the depths, the sunrise, the sea – are not about a place to hide
- But realising that there is nowhere he can go outside of God's care
- the believer knows that even if we cannot see God, he sees us, even in the dark
- for God is light and in his is no darkness at all – he sees and he knows

III YOU MADE ME

When we really want to know about something we can do little better than consult the maker

- the Psalm writer is quite clear that God is his creator
- we live in an atheistic and godless age, where slowly, all our values are chipped away
- when the godless propaganda of a universe without a creator
- seeped into our thinking at the turn of the last century
- who would have thought that it would all come to the world we live in today

In my work in the hospitals, it is taken for granted that my role is not to convert anyone

- much the same is true with my work with schools – and I accept that
- and yet, those of us who are believers, should not miss the fact
- that people are trying to convert us all the time
- to a world without a creator, to eternity without a Lord, to life without meaning

David, our Psalm-writer, is in no doubt that God made him

- God is the creator, but his creative work and concern includes individuals
- God discerns and perceives the nature and needs of his people
- His creative work has purpose and meaning – even when we cannot see it

When I go to London, one of the things that I like to do is go to the National Gallery

- I didn't like doing that much as a child
- But now I can get my own back by inflicting it on my children
- As you look at a painting, you realise that it is possible to be too close to it
- You need to get further back from it to see what is going on

Recently, I admired a lovely cross-stitch on a member's wall, it was an original

- However, whether cross-stitch or tapestry, it is possible to look at the wrong side
- It is only when you are looking at the right side, from the right distance
- That everything that is there makes sense
- The believer trusts that God's creative work has purpose and meaning
- Even if we do not always see that purpose and meaning clearly

King David knew that God knew him before he was born

- God created his inmost being (his spiritual nature, if you like)
- And a physical being – like the prophet Jeremiah (1:5)
- God knew him and formed him for a purpose – and he is thankful
- God saw his unformed body – all human life is God's handiwork and Psalm 139
- Is his 'no' to all who would cut it off by abortion one end or euthanasia the other

From even before our birth

- God knew us, thought of us, loved us – but does that mean we are mere robots?
- Many years ago, a church member had a serious falling out with me
- But not long after he fell very gravely ill – as I entered his home he said to me,
- “I knew you would come” – but his knowing did not make me come, did it?
- The days of our life are known before they even come to be – it's like a dream
- But when we wake up, in the morning or on the eternal morning God is there

IV YOU TEST ME

At the end of the Psalm there is a sudden change of mood

- Versions of the Psalm in hymnbooks and prayer books shy away from this
- Because the tone changes from thanksgiving and overwhelming gratitude
- To imprecation – the wicked have caused the Psalmist great anguish
- And, although the Lord has been good to him
- He prays that God will remove the cause of evil in this world
- For the Psalmist sees no purpose in the existence of the wicked
- They are blood thirsty men, who speak with evil intent and blaspheme
- Which not only means to use God's name to swear
- But not to accord to the creator of heaven and earth the glory due his name

For the Psalm writer it is clear matter of making sure you know which side you are on

- It is not a matter of personal animosity
- But devotion to the Lord excludes any loyalty to those who hate him
- The modern trend, of course, is to hate the sin and love the sinner
- But even so we must acknowledge that sin finds its home in the heart
- Is it possible to hate Nazism and love the Nazi – I suggest that it is not
- But it is possible to love the Nazi in a way that sees the person God created
- And – through the his grace and power - the person God wants that person to become
- In short, the sinner is simultaneously the object of the love and wrath of God
- But God wants us to move from the ranks of the sinners to the ranks of the saved
- That does not mean that the saved never do bad things
- Any more than it means that sinners never do good things
- It is the fundamental relationship with God that has changed
- And for the believer today it changes through Jesus

When evil men accused him, instead of focusing his attention upon them

- David, our Psalm-writer, focuses his attention on God
- God who discerns his heart and thoughts can do that with others too
- After a brief outburst against the godlessness of the world
- The Psalmist returns to his main theme

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

(Psalm 139:23-24)

Because he wants nothing more than to do God's will

- He prays for God to examine his spiritual condition
- Many Christians today are expressing faith as a journey – and that's fine
- But the misleading element is the implication that all journeys have the same end
- For the Psalmist that is not the case – he wants to know clearly
- Is he journeying on the offensive way or the everlasting way?
- The one way leads to death and destruction
- The other to life and fellowship with God – it is too serious a matter to get wrong

The unbeliever thinks that God does not know him or her

- Is far away or does not notice
- Is not in any sense the personal creator
- And is not calling to a personal faith which tries and test us

But the believers are assured that God does know us, each one, personally

- That we are enfolded, surrounded, tucked-in by his grace
- When everything seemed to be going against the Apostle Paul
- And many of his friends deserted him – he affirmed

The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength

(2 Timothy 4:17)

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