

Sermon– Sunday 20th June

Psalm 139

Hello, good morning! It's great to be with you all – my name is Ben and as I mentioned last week I am an ordinand/trainee vicar at Trinity College Bristol, and I'm here on a part time placement – its really great to be with you this morning.

I want to start with a bit of a thought exercise for us all. So make sure you're sitting comfortably! Maybe close your eyes if that is helpful.

I want you to think of a time or a situation when you've felt really *understood*. When you've been heard, been recognised, been known. Maybe there's a particular person in your life, whether a peer or someone you look up to, who you really click with or you find it really easy to communicate with. Or maybe, if we broaden this notion a little bit, you play a team sport and there have been instances when you've just linked up really well in the game, which has felt seamless. Maybe you play an instrument and can think of experiences of playing with others and that sense of togetherness, that connectedness. Just pause for a moment to think of an example, and maybe share it with someone next to you.

Now I want you to think of a time when you've felt really *misunderstood*. When you've felt like you've not been heard, or that you've struggled to get the words out, or they've been misinterpreted by someone else. Maybe you've felt silenced or ignored or caricatured. Sometimes these instances can result in humour or just simple learning and awareness of human differences and fallibility, particularly if it is something small or less important. Sometimes these experiences can be a really painful, and leave us feeling isolated. Pause for moment to think of an example, and maybe share it with someone near you.

As Christians we praise and honour and worship the *love* that God has for us in Jesus Christ – that is the very substance of the gospel, the good news, and it is wholly right that we focus and prize it as the crown jewel of our faith. But, as the New York Pastor Tim Keller once said, 'To be loved and not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. To be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.'

This morning I'd like us to spend some time with Psalm 139 and dwelling on the fact that we are fully *known* by God. This is a teaching that gives ballast and depth to this praise of God's love – it is a teaching which yields wonder.

In short, God knows us really well – and I mean *really* well. We are completely transparent to him. On one level, (if we remember our RE classes!) this is true of all things – it is in the nature of God to know all things. He is 'omniscient'. As the theologian Thomas Aquinas said, he knows all things in a single glance.

But what is so beautiful and wonderful about this Psalm is how specific and personal this knowing is – 'O Lord, you have searched *me*, and known *me*.' It is a breathtaking thought, that more than any other person in our lives, even our closest friend, even our spouse, our parents, God knows us. There is no intimacy, confidante, or friendship that can compare - and that includes ourselves. This God is unfathomably, incomparably, even brazenly intimate. He knows our activity and our thoughts, our work and our rest, our silence and our speech – he is, as David says, familiar with all our ways – even more than we are!

And twice does the psalmist simply stop in wonder and awe at this knowledge of the knowledge God has of us – see in vs 6, 'it is too wonderful for me! I cannot attain it!' And again in vs 17 and 18 – 'how weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!'

This consideration is really a marker, a clear indicator of the *uniqueness* of the relationship that God has with us, an indicator of the holiness of God in our lives, of the holy place that God has in our lives – yes, God is a relational, personal God, that much is clear. God is our friend we might say – but this is no friendship that simply exists alongside other friendships. It is friendliness, a familiarity, an acquaintance that is incomparable, unique, and beyond our comprehension.

We really find the root of this at the heart of this Psalm – this God is the one who formed my inward parts, who knit me together in my mother's womb (vs 13). The unique relationship that God has with us is a uniqueness that stems from the fact that this One and no other is our Creator. The Psalmist paints this picture of our being formed and made 'in the depths of the earth', and 'in secret' by God – hidden from all other eyes, before anyone had seen us, known us, met us, before we ourselves had become

conscious – there was God. There was God weaving us into being, looking forward to, even planning, our future days. The unique friendship we have with God is a friendship with have with our Maker. The unique knowledge that God has of us is of one who made us as the wonderful, quirky, unique people we are – he knows us as his very own creation.

But there is more here – there is something strikingly *active* about this relationship, this familiarity that God has with us. We mentioned briefly that potentially nerve-wracking, potentially dangerous idea of God ‘planning’ or ‘ordaining’ our days beforehand, that puzzle of the foreknowledge of God. But it need not lead us to stop short in our wonder through puzzlement or suspicion or discomfort about our own free choice or decision – it is rather the basis of what David describes as the hemming in of God behind and before us, the laying of his hand on us (vs 5), the guidance of God on our lives (vs10). For just as God knew us in the darkness and secrecy of our mother’s womb, and more, *actively* knit us together, so in what seems often like the darkness and confusion of our lives, does God see us, know us, and more so, actively *lead* us, hold us and guide us through. Just like that seamlessness of understanding in sport or music, or that unspoken understanding in a close friendship, so in a similar way I think does God weave together his purposes for our lives, as seamlessly as he wove us together in our mother’s womb. ‘...if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand hold me fast.’ (Psalm 139:10)

Now, in reading this psalm there is a certain break in this lyrical poetry - we are caught up in this rich wonder of the psalm from vs1-18 – and then in vs19 we are brought to an uncomfortable jolt. ‘If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!’ Where, we might ask, does this outburst come from?

It indicates I think another side to this beautiful intimacy that the Psalm depicts. Here we have the God of David who knows him first hand as his very own creation, who is familiar with all his ways. But, the fact that the darkness will not be darkness but light to God, that the night ‘shines like the day’, is also judgment upon that darkness – there is a side to the overwhelming wonder of the knowledge God that is a rightful fear of God’s searing and unflinching gaze. God does not turn a blind eye.

So perhaps we might see this outburst from David in this way - his meditation upon the depth and wonder of God’s thoughts on him throws into sharp relief the wickedness of evil, which seeks to destroy God’s good

creation, which ignores and rejects God as having that unique place in our lives as our Creator. This intimacy that David has found with God is a holy intimacy, it is precious, unique and sacred – and as such it burns against the pursuit of living against the truth of God, the truth of the goodness of God's creation and God's good purposes for his creation.

But notice that David finally turns the spotlight onto himself. The Psalm begins with the declaration that the Lord has searched and known him – the Psalm ends with this declaration as a prayer, that God would do this again – '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.' (vs 23-24)

To close, I wonder whether you would bring to mind that experience of not feeling understood, of not feeling heard or listened to. I think each of us have borne the brunt of not being treated or seen or recognised for being the hand-woven people of God that we are. Perhaps this morning we need to hear and know again that God sees us and knows and loves us as his own creation, in a way that nobody else does.

But also, we too have fallen short of treating others as if they were hand-knitted, known and loved by their Creator, in all their uniqueness. We too have looked past them. We ask and pray for God to search and know our hearts to see and love those around us, as God's precious creation.

Not only that, but also in ourselves do we find the tendency to resist the truth of God knowing and leading us – primarily by not trusting him. In many ways we shirk and shy from the holy intimacy with him for which we were created. 'Test me and know my anxious thoughts' – yes, we know our anxious thoughts well! And so we pray that prayer of David, and ask God to shine his light upon us, to search our hearts by his Spirit, and to assure us that God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)