

Sunday 7th February – Psalm 139: 'The Guardian'

So we come to the last of our series on the Psalms today, and after looking at a less well-known psalm last week, we finish with one of the all-time favourites: Psalm 139. I can verify that this claim is true – a study of Google searches for psalms in 2014 had this one at number 5 in the list of most requested psalms. You won't be surprised that Psalm 23 'The Lord is my shepherd' was number one, but this is not far behind.

Of all the psalms, this one perhaps speaks most deeply about the sense of God's abiding presence, and many of its phrases are among the most loved in the bible:

- You have searched me and you know me
- You hem me in
- If I rise on the wings of the dawn
- I am fearfully and wonderfully made
- All the days ordained for me were written in your book
- When I awake I am still with you

It is also something of a marmite psalm though. Most people love it – but not everyone likes it. Some people find the first few verses suffocating. The idea that God knows everything about us, even down to the last detail... To a generation raised on Big Brother, and a surveillance society like ours with 14 million CCTV cameras, it's easy to put sinister associations on the idea of an authority figure knowing everything about us. In the rest of life we consider that to be a bad thing.

The issue, of course is about motives. In the world, this kind of knowledge is used for control and punishment. But here in this psalm, it's about love and security. God is not checking up on us, but taking good care of us. He is a loving parent, not a vengeful tyrant. He hems us in for our wellbeing. He is familiar with our ways because he knows us and loves us. We can't ever escape God's presence because the whole earth is his. It means **we are never without God, we are never apart from his love and care.**

But it's good to see this psalm as a kind of internal dialogue for David. I think David writes this psalm because he is anxious, there is something troubling him. So he begins in the first 6 verses by affirming God's presence and care – but there is something anxious about his cry in v7 – 'where can I go from your Spirit, where can I flee from your presence?' There's the hint that's he's tempted to do this, there is something he's trying to get away from. So the psalm swings from calm to an underlying mood of anxiety....

... and then David returns to equilibrium by re-affirming God's presence with him from birth, creating his very being. The next section (verses 13-18) is one of the great passages of scripture declaring God's presence with us from cradle to grave. It likewise has this wonderful balancing of majesty and intimacy. God's greatness includes wisdom which outnumbers the grains of sand – but in the midst of this mystery David clings on to one very simple fact which underpins his life, the one thing that really matters: 'When I awake, I am still with you.'

It's as if he tosses and turns on his bed thinking about things he can't fathom, and then settles his soul with the one fundamental truth of his existence: **God isn't going anywhere – he is always with him**, and it is enough to know that when he awakes, God is *still* with him.

The psalm could end there, but instead David finds himself anxious again – which brings us to the other marmite bit of the psalm: the verses about hate. We didn't read it earlier, and the reason is simply time. But I was conflicted in making that decision, because I've often listened to this psalm with verses 19-22 cut out, as if we're a bit embarrassed about them. It's why I deliberately removed more than these just these verses, so that I wasn't just avoiding the hard bit!

The reality is that psalms are written before Christ, so there are parts which the New Testament re-evaluates. David was a real and honest human being, and I think it's best to see these verses as part of this internal dialogue going on within David. He was calm, then anxious, then calm – and then, again, *anxious thoughts intrude on his sense of wellbeing*.

He thinks of all the bad people in the world, and what they've done to him and others and, above all, God. As we've observed before, the important thing is that he turns these thoughts back to God, and asks God to judge, to intervene – thereby removing his own capacity to do so. That is not a bad strategy for us, too, in dealing with angry or hateful thoughts.

It also explains why the psalm finishes as it does. David is struggling with anxiety and, having vented his frustrations, he asks God to heal him again. 'Search me O God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts.' It's a lovely way to end, and to return to calm again: 'See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

I love this psalm, not just because of its sense of intimacy and its memorable phrases, but also because of its struggle with anxiety. **It reflects the real journey of a real soul**. This is the great value of the psalms – they are the songs and prayers of real people. And so we end as we began, offering our heartfelt cries to God, and may this be a prayer for all of us in this challenging season:

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. Amen.