

Reflection on Psalm 139
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We are in week 6 of lockdown. Apart from one another but together in faith and all one in Christ. This week, apart from Wild Church as tomorrow morning's reflection, we are looking at some of the Psalms, considering how they can help us to look more closely at our relationship with God and with each other as part of his glorious creation. As an overarching theme for the week we are holding in our hearts and minds as we come together like this, v6 from Psalm 34, which we will finish with on Saturday. "This poor soul cried, and the Lord heard me and saved me from all my troubles."

Today we will be taking a brief look at Psalm 139. But first let us start with a hymn based on it. Please do join in with me if you wish – the words are on this accompanying sheet.

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down, you are before me,
Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
And with love everlasting you besiege me:
In ev'ry moment of life or death, you are.

Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
You have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past and future too.

Although your Spirit is upon me,
Still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you:
Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

For you created me and shaped me,
Gave me life within my mother's womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:
Safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down, you are before me,
Ever the maker and keeper of my days

Psalm 139

- 1 O Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
- 2 You mark out my journeys and my resting place
and are acquainted with all my ways.
- 3 For there is not a word on my tongue,
but you, O Lord, know it altogether.
- 4 You encompass me behind and before
and lay your hand upon me.
- 5 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
so high that I cannot attain it.
- 6 Where can I go then from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
- 8 If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
- 9 Even there your hand shall lead me,
your right hand hold me fast.
- 10 If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me
and the light around me turn to night,'
- 11 Even darkness is no darkness with you;
the night is as clear as the day;
darkness and light to you are both alike.
- 12 For you yourself created my inmost parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 13 I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
marvellous are your works, my soul knows well.
- 14 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was made in secret
and woven in the depths of the earth.
- 15 Your eyes beheld my form, as yet unfinished;
already in your book were all my members written,
- 16 As day by day they were fashioned
when as yet there was none of them.
- 17 How deep are your counsels to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!
- 18 If I count them, they are more in number than the sand,
and at the end, I am still in your presence.
- 19 O that you would slay the wicked, O God,
that the bloodthirsty might depart from me!
- 20 They speak against you with wicked intent;
your enemies take up your name for evil.
- 21 Do I not oppose those, O Lord, who oppose you?
Do I not abhor those who rise up against you?
- 22 I hate them with a perfect hatred;
they have become my own enemies also.

- 23 Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and examine my thoughts.
24 See if there is any way of wickedness in me
and lead me in the way everlasting.

This Psalm is one of the mystery and the wonder of the love of God. We cannot possibly know the depth of God's knowledge and understanding of us and our hearts but we can wonder and rejoice in it.

This is a deeply personal Psalm and a favourite of many, including me, perhaps because we are assured time and again by the psalmist that even though we do not know God, he knows us. This is a comforting thought.

It is divided up into parts, vv1-6 and vv13-18 focus on God's unfathomable knowledge of us whilst vv7-12 prompt us to reflect on the inescapable nature of God. "Where can I go then from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" If we stop and think about this properly, it can be a little overwhelming to think how God knows our every thought, word and deed even before we do. But there is also a great comfort in knowing that we are never far from God. Stop for a moment and hold that thought.

We hear from the psalmist how before we know God, he knows us in our deepest being. It is a theme that is seen elsewhere in the Bible, such as in the verse from Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5a).

We recognise then, that God is beyond time – he is with us in every moment, past, present and future. Such an awesome love as expressed in v5: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, so high that I cannot attain it." Is beyond our comprehension – yet we can trust it completely.

(This psalm reminds me of the children's song we sing with actions at Storybags – Jesus' love is very wonderful – so high you can't get over it etc.)

That little children's song is one of my favourites (and often an earworm during the day – I find myself singing it at all kinds of odd times!) to me it reflects some of the same sentiment of this psalm today, that real sense of an all-encompassing love that surrounds us, holds us and protects us, as a mother protects her child in the womb. I wonder how that little song resonates with the mums at Storybags when we sing it with them and with the children.

In the language of this psalm we are brought on a journey from staring up and out at the cosmos and wondering at the sheer vastness of God into the deeply personal relationship with God – the psalmist addresses God as "you" – there is a closeness we are invited to share, a familiarity that would seem only right with the one who has created our inmost parts as is written in v13 and the psalmist is talking directly to God using the words I/ we: drawing on his or her own personal experience of God –

it is a close, intimate relationship and one that we are invited to consider for ourselves.

It is God that gives our lives value – through his nurture and we are reminded here that our lives began like that.

In this time of struggle and adversity the question of who am I? and who am I in God? is possibly more pertinent than ever. And we certainly considered that when we looked at the lines from Psalm 42 yesterday, reflecting on how we are all thirsty for God. We are in need. Our once throw-away society is having to learn to live differently, to treasure what is real and to let go of what is not. Perhaps that is why prayer has become so important to people right now and why reading and praying with the psalms can truly speak into this time.

We are invited to recognise ourselves in God, when we are calling to him, to recognise that we are in fact calling home. We are returning to the place where we were made, we are invited to find ourselves again in the one who knows us and loves us.

Because we are loved by a God who loves us so completely, so fully, we have a value and identity that cannot be taken from us – this is even more poignant now as we realise what is important in life, that is not money or possessions, not the next step up the ladder or what people may think of us but family and living a good life, and living it in faith. Our value is in the God who loves us, and from whom we cannot be separated.

In my sending parish in Australia I can remember standing at the altar each week, serving the priest and so I would hear the quiet prayers he would say, whispered under his breath as he prepared himself for Holy Communion. The last sentence of one of these prayers was: “never let me be parted from you”. Only those closest to the priest would hear it, and not always, it is a quiet supplication and very personal in its nature – between only God and the priest, but something in his saying it quietly from the heart it struck me as being also a prayer for all of us. It is our deepest desire to remain close to God. I have always thought that little line of prayer calling to God in a whisper to be one of the most beautiful parts of the service.

We are being invited into a mystery – the one where we cannot possibly understand even the smallest bit about God but we know and trust that he knows everything about us – our inner most thoughts and feelings,

It is a mystery indeed but it is the most real relationship we will ever have – as we are reminded in vv7-12, we cannot escape God, and perhaps like me you may have tried but the call to be drawn to him is irresistible and so we are drawn into this wondrous mystery where we are encompassed by a love that is so beautiful, so complete it is impossible not to respond in the way that the psalmist does in v23/ 24 asking God to seek out any wickedness and to lead us on. We end the way we began with God searching our souls:

Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and examine my thoughts.

See if there is any way of wickedness in me
and lead me in the way everlasting

I encourage you to reread this psalm today and spend a little time resting in the sense of wonder that it instills. We are fearfully and wonderfully made – so let us rest in the loving gaze of God. Do nothing but rest in the gaze of your creator – knowing that there is nothing you can do to make him love you any more or any less. This can be a healing time. To know that you don't have to be anywhere else right now other than resting in God on this day.

We can be overwhelmed sometimes when we try to consider the awesomeness of God, and the weight of trying can be heavy and cumbersome. Today you need not do anything but rest your weariness, your troubles and worries beneath the loving gaze of God.

Be in the place where every part of you is known.
Be held.
Be still.
Be real.
Be safe.
Be loved.