

Psalm 139 1-12 23-24

Do you ever have an encounter with a married couple, or sometimes old friends, where it appears that there is really just one person speaking out of two mouths? Sometimes it happens and it can be a surreal experience, because it is difficult to know who to talk to. I have one couple like that in work, and it has taken me quite a while to figure out what is going on because the wife will phone up to order her prescriptions, none of which appear on her records. After a while and a great deal of confusion I managed to figure out that she really wanted to order her husband's medication, but in her mind the two of them share everything so there is really no difference. People live together so intimately and for so long that the boundaries between them become blurred, and they can complete each other's sentences. Lorraine and I have been married for 27 years, and last year marked the 41st anniversary of us meeting. We have been married for longer than we lived before we got married. We have got to know each other very well in that time. We went for a meal recently and I had Lorraine's choice picked out before she did .

I suspect that Lorraine could easily finish my sentences. When I get to the point of being able to start one at some point perhaps we may find out!

The point I am making is that people who live closely together and who love one another tend to become closer and closer. Eventually some of them are so intertwined that they share thought processes, values and can communicate without words.

Our Psalm today gives us a beautiful picture of how intimately God knows us.

"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise, you perceive my thoughts from afar"

This is one of my favourite passages of scripture, but I have mostly focussed on the verses which are left out of the Lectionary reading for today -where the Psalmist talks beautifully about how God knit him together in his mother's womb, how fearfully and wonderfully God creates his children. That part of the Psalm is beautiful, and well worth reading and committing to memory. Our passage today though, looks not at God's creation of us, but rather at the knowledge he has of us.

What is the difference? In some ways this is a moot point, because God both created us and he knows us intimately, but He could have created us and let us go. He could have treated us in the way turtles do – often in nature programmes you see turtles hauling themselves onto the beach, digging holes in the sand and laying their eggs. The mothers then go back into the sea and swim away. In a sense those mother turtles have created the babies which will emerge eventually, but they will never meet their offspring, they will not take care of them and the baby turtles will have to fend for themselves. The nature programmes tend to show the outcomes of that in graphic detail. The tiny little baby turtles fight their way up through the sand, they blink in the bright light and they make a dash to the sea. And on the way they are picked off by seagulls, crabs, dogs, cats, fish, sharks, and everything else in the vicinity which is hungry. The creator leaves the created objects alone, and does not know them at all.

God has absolutely created us, however he has done more than that. He knows us. He loves us. He shares every aspect of our being. The verses we have read show

that very clearly. He knows what we do, he knows what we are going to say before we say it, he hems us in. He is wherever we go – we cannot hide in the heights of the heavens, or in the depths of the sea, because God is there ahead of us.

It takes a lot of love to be with someone that intimately. Some have it easier than others – Lorraine obviously has a much easier time of it than most – (she really doesn't). Knowing someone that well requires a great deal of love to overcome annoyance at their flaws, faults and irritating habits. With love, however, deep, intimate knowledge brings people closer and closer together.

Why is that relevant? I am reading through the Bible again this year and I have chosen a plan on the YouVersion bible app called The Balanced Bible reading plan. That takes a passage from Law, History, Poetry, Prophecy, Gospels/Acts and Epistles each day. It is a really good way to get a flavour of the whole canon of scripture. One of the readings this week was from Leviticus 16. Those of you who attended the Walk through the Bible a few weeks ago can tell me what Leviticus represents – the hand gesture was – (hands out for offerings and feasts). Leviticus is a fairly dense book, but it gives a fantastic insight into what the Jewish people were required to do as part of their worship of God. Leviticus 16 specifically gives details about how Aaron – as high priest, the individual closest to God – would approach him in the most holy place. I'm not going to read the whole chapter to you, but a summary is this:

- Aaron can't enter the Holy place any time he likes, or he will die.
- He has to bring a young bull and a ram for sin offering and burnt offering.
- He has to bathe, then put on sacred garments
- He gets two goats and another ram for offerings
- He casts lots which will spare one of the goats – a scapegoat
- He sacrifices the bull and burns incense. He sprinkles some of the bull's blood seven times
- This is repeated with the goat.
- The whole area has to be clear of other people
- Aaron lays hands on the live goat, confesses the nations sin and the goat is released.
- Aaron then changes out of the ceremonial clothes, and bathes again.
- Aaron then sacrifices the ram (I'm sure you were wondering where it had got to)
- The man who released the scape goat has to bathe
- The remains of the goat and bull are moved out of camp and burned
- The man burning them has to wash his clothes and himself
- Nobody is allowed to do any work all day
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Isn't that a serious amount of faff! And it is important to realise that this was done on just one day each year, so that one man, the high priest, would be able to enter the presence of God. The rest of Israel, the entire nation of God's chosen people were unable to ever enter His presence. Even the high priest had a lot to do to get there. How does that compare to the intimate knowledge God has of the Psalmist? The two seem to be poles apart. It is hard to imagine that even the high priest had a close relationship with God when he had so much pomp and ceremony to go through to

get in his presence once a year. And yet in Psalm 139 we are told, time and again, that God knows us more deeply and intimately than we can ever imagine.

That intimate knowledge can be a bit uncomfortable. I have worked with some people who knew me very well, but if they were to start completing my sentences I would be horrified as I simply don't want that kind of intimacy with them. God tells us that he knows when we sit and rise, where we go, he knows all our ways. We cannot flee from him because he is there before us. How can we, as sinful people, be acceptable to a Holy God – how can he not require us to do at least the same amount of preparation as the high priest had to carry out?

The answer is Jesus. Romans 5v8 “ God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”

God loves us. He lives intimately with us. The only way a holy god can do that is by sacrifice. Aaron had to sacrifice animals, and follow rituals, just to have a glimpse, a grasp of contact with God. Aaron's sin, and that of the nation, had to be covered up, and the animal sacrifices were never sufficient. Christ's sacrifice is complete, full, all covering and absolutely sufficient. It allows us to have God not just as our creator, but as our intimate associate through everything we may encounter. It changes our relationship from a created being to people who live with God intimately, assured that He is with us wherever we go, whatever we face. As Christians we are never alone, never isolated. We go in the strength and care of our God.

What we need to do is found in the closing verses of the Psalm. We have to come to God, ask him to search us and know us, to forgive us for offences in the power of the sacrifice Jesus made for us, so that we can live in harmony and fellowship with him through eternity.

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.

Collect of the Word

Saving God, in Jesus Christ you opened for us a new and living way into your presence; give us pure hearts and constant wills to worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen