

God knows.

Do you ever get the feeling that you're being watched? These days, if you're at the shops, or in a public building, or on the roads, there's a good chance you are being watched.

Surveillance can be a good and useful thing, of course. It can keep us safe. It can provide security. But there is often a feeling that it can become excessive and scary, and of course that it can be misused. Sometimes we can take comfort that 'the innocent have nothing to fear'.... But that doesn't always hold as systems become bigger, more complex and even corrupted.

Surveillance, to some degree is a fact of life. Sometimes, the benefits outweigh the costs, but sometimes it can make us nervous.

We can feel uncomfortable when people know too much about us. When companies can manipulate specials and offers to encourage us to do certain things and buy certain products.

But on the other hand, sometimes it's good that people know us. It's good to be appreciated for who we are. It's good to belong.

And there is a human need to belong – to be known and accepted. In 1943, the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, proposed a theory of a hierarchy of needs, with food and shelter at the bottom, then security, and so on with each layer being more important, psychologically, than the one below it. Above food and shelter and security is belongingness.

Hopefully we can see this hierarchy in action here each Sunday morning, we welcome people into our church building – it's nice and warm and dry in here. And then we invite everyone to morning tea and offer them tea and coffee after the service.

In those things, we meet their lower level needs of food, drink and shelter. And then we talk to them "Where do you come from?", "what do you do?", "what brings you to worship here this morning?", "how has your week been?".

We get to know them. We get to know who they are, we find things in common, we find points of interest, we – hopefully - accept them for who they are, just like we would want to be accepted.

Of course, no one is likely to tell everything. Because there are some things we'd prefer not to share, aren't there?

While we do have a need to be loved for who we are, people we often afraid of being rejected for who we are. Not just for things we have done, but for the thoughts that we might have. Things that we are embarrassed about, or afraid of people finding out about. We are afraid; if people who know us really knew what we were like, on the inside, would they still like us?

Do we share the details of our past, our darkest thoughts? Our selfish motives? If others were to search us, to perceive our thoughts and were familiar with all our ways, would they still accept us?

Scary thoughts.

And today's psalm reading has been used – is used – to tap into those fears. 'You have searched me, Lord, and you know me... you perceive my thoughts from afar...you are familiar with all my ways'. We can so easily get an image of the 'cosmic policeman God'. God sitting in heaven getting ready to throw thunderbolts at we unworthy sinners. The God who will smite those who displease him. Big Brother God. God is watching you. And if you make just one wrong move... well ZAP! You're done for.

But as I contemplate this psalm, that is not image of God that I see. The tone of this psalm isn't dark: It's not a psalm of fear; it's a psalm of praise.

David, the author of this psalm, knows that God searches him, knows him, perceives his thoughts, is familiar with his ways, and yet his response is not to cower in fear, instead, it's to praise God!

Remember this is David. Slayer of Goliath, but also King David: adulterer, murderer, liar...

Like David, all of us do fall short of everything that God desires us to be, but God, the God who created us, calls us to be reconciled to him. He gave his son for us! We must be pretty special, mustn't we?

The fact that God knows us all for who we really are - for who we are when no one is looking - should not scare us. Think about it: for all the things David had done, God hadn't struck him down. And whatever you might have done, or said, or thought, God hasn't struck you down either!

That's not to say that God doesn't want us to turn away from whatever those things might be, to 'repent of our sins' as we say. And it's not to say there won't be lasting consequences to what we do wrong. But it's saying that God is accepting of you.

So far from being scary, the fact that God knows us so well, can be reassuring.

But it's the not just God's knowledge of us that is assuring, but also God's very presence.

Things are always worse when we're alone.

And this psalm reassures us that we're never completely alone, "You hem me in behind and before, you lay your hand upon me".

Whatever dark place David was in, God was there. Whatever dark place we might find ourselves in, God is there. The Lord is our shepherd, as we sang in our last hymn, a shepherd who is with us even when we walk in death's dark vale.

Verses 7 to 12 of this Psalm explore this further: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol [the underworld], you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (139:7-10)

"If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you." (139:11-12)

Sometimes people will think of these verses in a negative way, that David is contemplating fleeing from God, and deciding that such a thing is impossible. But I think that David is contemplating the presence of God wherever he goes – the shepherd who not only leads, but protects, rather than dwelling on the futility of trying to flee from God.

The light that David describes here is not a searchlight, seeking out a fugitive, instead it is a helpful light – a lantern to light our way, to help us avoid dangers. This imagery is echoed in the opening of John's gospel, when John says of Jesus "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5)

So God knows us, and God is with us. God loves us. Even though God knows us, God loves us.

He knows us better than anyone else – in the verses that follow today's reading, David says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb ... My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in that secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." (139: 13, 15-16).

God loves us because he created us: God the Father, creator and the giver of life. God cares for us as a parent cares for his or her children.

We who have been made in God's image are loved by the God who made us. David says later in this psalm, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made". (139:14)

We are, each of us, special to God.

We may have turned away from God, collectively and individually, but he made us, and he longs for our return to him. For me, the image of the prodigal son's father is strong

here – I’m sure you know the story, the younger son has gone away, wasted his inheritance, and decides to go back to his father and beg for menial job, “but while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him”. (Luke 15:20)

And then, when the older son is out in the fields feeling miserable because his brother has been welcomed back with much celebration – more than he’d ever received – the father goes out to meet him too. Both his sons were special to that father.

And that is how it is with God and us; we are special to God, and even when we were separated from God, God is filled with compassion for us and provides us with the means of reconciliation to him. He reaches out to us – all we need to do is respond. To turn to him in faith.

But we shouldn’t leave this psalm with a sense of smugness, we shouldn’t go away just being confident that God loves us and that we are fearfully and wonderfully made – we need to remember that we were made that way by God. However special we may be, that doesn’t come close to how great God is... The God who made us. The God who gave his only son for us. The God who calls us.

This psalm is a psalm of praise, and it’s a great model of a prayer of praise for us.

Our prayers are so often of repentance, of petition and of thanksgiving, and we don’t always take time to offer praise.

This psalm is about God, not about us. Yes, it is very personal – it’s all ‘I’ and ‘You’ language, but it focuses on God, not David. It’s about how wonderful God is, but it is also about God’s relationship with David (and, it follows, God’s relationship with us). This is a psalm praising God’s knowledge, God’s presence, and God’s creative power. And we can learn something about how we should be responding to God, relating to God, and relating to each other. The psalm reflects the unique connection between God and God’s people – each one of us.

There is indeed a human need to belong: we need to appreciate that need, and just as God meets that need for us, we should seek to do that for each other as well.

And in saying that, the belonging isn’t just about God knowing facts about us. David says “you have searched me...”; “You discern my thoughts...”, “[you] are acquainted with all my ways”.

And when we do get to know people, get to understand them, then we need to be accepting too. Our getting to know people shouldn’t be an act of collecting facts about what’s wrong with people. Fault-finding is not a godly activity. We shouldn’t be judging – and while judgement is a theme that comes up often in the bible; the gospels, and Paul’s letters, make it clear the judgement is not up to us.

We need to be accepting, and that's not really about being accepting of the hypothetical homeless person who happens to wander in here one Sunday morning. Rather, it's about accepting the person who sits near you in church, but appreciates different aspects of worship to you. Or who dresses differently.

Or who has a more liberal r more conservative understanding of God than you do. Or perhaps votes a different way to you. But in all of this, we need to, as David did, take time to appreciate God, to realise how God knows us and to praise God. Praise God because we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

God is there with you. God knows you. God cares for you.
And God loves you.

Amen