

## **Fearfully and wonderfully made**

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me... you perceive my thoughts from afar... you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.

How does that make you feel?

Because we're often scared of people getting to know us too well, often afraid of being rejected for who we are. Not just for things we have done, but for the thoughts that we might have. We want to belong, but there are things that we are embarrassed about, or afraid of people finding out about. We want to belong but we worry: if the people who seem to like us really knew what we were like, on the inside, would they still like us? Would they still include us? What would they think of our past? Or our darkest thoughts? What if they knew our selfish motives and our petty rivalries? If others were to search us, to perceive our thoughts and were familiar with all our ways, would they still accept us?

Scary thoughts.

Today's psalm 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 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 who is watching every single thing you do.

And if you make just one wrong move... well ZAP! You're done for.

But as we contemplate this psalm, I really don't think that's the image of God that we get, if we think about its tone, and everything the psalmist says. I don't think it's dark - it's not a psalm of lament or fear; it's a psalm of praise.

The psalmist 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, but rather it's to praise God!

The psalmist says "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made". How many of us say that?

But he says "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" - and this psalmist is David. When we think of David, foremost in our minds is that he was the one

who slew Goliath, and maybe also that he became King David, but was originally a shepherd, and that he was the author – the composer – of many of the psalms. But we should also remember that David was an adulterer, a murderer, and a liar... and yet he prays in this psalm, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” What an amazing thing to pray – I wonder how many of us would pray such a thing?

In fact, I understand that the original Hebrew can be legitimately translated as ‘I praise you because I am awesomely wonderful!’. How does that sit with you? Do you think you’re awesomely wonderful? Do you know many awesomely wonderful people? Are the people around you this morning awesomely wonderful?

Of course, there are many good reasons, biblically sound reasons, to not wander about declaring ourselves to be awesomely wonderful, but sometimes it is worth thinking about and remembering: We are all part of God’s creation, and, after all, we read in Genesis that ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.’ (1:31a).

In spite of that, though, we do fall short of everything that God desires us to be, but the God who created us also calls us to be reconciled to him. In Matthew’s gospel we read that Jesus said plainly, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (9:14), and Paul writes to the Romans that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [but are justified by the grace of God through Jesus Christ]’ (3:23).

God calls us to come to him *as we are*.

The fact that God knows us for who we really are 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 you to turn away from whatever those things might be, to ‘repent of your sins’ as we are fond of saying in church. And that’s not to say there won’t be consequences when we do wrong, either. But it’s saying that God is accepting of you. God indeed meets us wherever we are – but God is not content for us to stay there.

In fact, part of our response to what God has done for us in the life and death of Jesus, is to be prepared to change. To repent. To turn away from following the ways of the world, and follow Jesus’ way instead. We won’t be perfect, this side of the new heavens and the new earth, but we can and we will be changed.

So, far from being scary, the fact that God knows each one of us so well, should be reassuring.

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

Things are always worse when you're alone - but this psalm reassures us that we're never completely alone, "*You hem me in behind and before, you lay your hand upon me*". David knew that whatever dark place he may have been in, God was there with him. Whatever dark place we are in, God is there, too.

Verses 7 to 12 of this Psalm which are skipped in today's lectionary reading, explore this further, beginning: "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* (139:7)

Again, these verses are often thought of 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, rather than dwelling on the futility of trying to flee from God.

Friends, God knows us, and God is with us, wherever we may be. And we can know, as David did, that God loves us. Even though God knows us, God loves us.

And then we might wonder: But why? But why does God love us?

We often struggle with 'why?' questions as we read the scriptures, and there is often simply no clear answer.

But I think that this Psalm does give us an answer to that 'why?' question – it might not be a complete answer, but I think it is a good one. Or at least a good start...

*"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." says David, "...Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*

God loves us because he created us: God the Father, creator and the giver of life. God cares for us as a father - a parent - cares for his or her children. We, who have been made in God's own image, are loved by the God who made us. We may have turned away from God, collectively and individually, but God made us, and God wants us to return to him. God longs for our return to him.

Because even when we are separated from God, God is filled with compassion for us and provides us with the means of reconciliation to him.

Jesus gives us that wonderful image in the parable of the prodigal son “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

And that’s how it is with God and us. God sees us wherever we are, and reaches out to us in Jesus.

We should rejoice in that. We should celebrate that.

But we shouldn’t leave this psalm with a sense of smugness, we shouldn’t go away just being confident that God loves us as we are and that we are, in fact, pretty awesomely wonderful people.

Because, though we might be awesomely wonderful - fearfully and wonderfully made – we need to remember that we were made that way by God. However awesomely wonderful we may be, that doesn’t come close to the awesome wonderfulness of the God who made us.

We are flawed people. We are all flawed people. And on our own, we are helpless – we can’t save ourselves. We need Jesus who came into this flawed world, to take his place with us, to live a human life and to die a human death, to open the way to reconciliation with God – to everlasting life.

This psalm is a song and a prayer of praise, and it’s a great model of a prayer of praise for us. Our prayers are so often of confession, of petition and of thanksgiving, and we seldom take time to offer praise.

Ultimately, this psalm is about God, not about us. It is very personal – it’s all ‘I’ and ‘You’ language, but it focuses on God, not David the psalmist. 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).

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 profound connection between God and God’s people.

We all want to belong. In a way, we need to belong. We need to appreciate that need, and just as God meets that need, we should seek to do that as well.

In saying that, that belongingness, 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. We shouldn't be judging – and while judgement is a theme that comes up often in the scriptures; the gospels, and Paul's letters, make it clear the judgement is not up to us.

We need to be accepting of others, and that's not really about being accepting of the hypothetical homeless person who happens to wander into a church on a Sunday morning. Rather, it's about accepting the person who appreciates different aspects of worship. Or doesn't like the same hymns as you, or doesn't sing them well. Or who dresses differently. 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 in response.

Praise God because you - we - are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Amen.