

Throughout our summer series of sermons, we have been exploring how we encounter God in the Old Testament. We end this series looking at the words and meaning of Psalm 139, which I mentioned in the first of the sermons on Adam hiding in the garden of Eden

I always enjoy watching *Who do you think you are*, the program that enables celebrities to delve into and encounter their past. To discover relatives, they had no idea existed, to understand a life that was different to theirs, a life affected by different aspects of social history and circumstances. In many cases, leaving a profound effect on the celebrity. I remember clearly, in an earlier series, Jeremy Paxman becoming overwhelmed with emotion with the knowledge that a distant grandparent had been in the workhouse. I recall Jerry Springer weeping by a wall at a train station, in Germany, where members of his Jewish family travelled to their deaths in concentration camps. Knowing where we come from, who we belong to is a great deal of us being who we are, it provides us with an identity and with a belonging. Somehow it gave them the bigger picture and a deeper understanding of themselves.

I remember going to stay with Dad's parents as a teenager. I was taken out and about by Gran, and often heard the same comment. 'eeh Ent she grand Ent she just like our Keith' and those who remember our Keith will know how alike we were. I even inherited his bushy eyebrows, but we won't dwell on that. But it is our sense of belonging as part of a family as part of a community of our employment that give us our identity, but how do we find this with God, where is our spiritual identity and where to we encounter and connect with God?

Psalm 139 is one of the most powerful passages in Scripture about this kind of encounter. It is generally agreed that David wrote this Psalm, which is a deep theological reflection on his relationship with God. He does not merely talk *about* God. He speaks as someone who has become deeply aware of God's presence, and the psalm breaks this down into four distinct sections. Of God knowing us completely. Of God being with us everywhere having created us intentionally, and of a God who searches and transforms us.

Firstly with God's knowledge of us, we hear "O LORD, you have searched me and known me." He knows our thoughts before we speak them. He knows our words before they reach our lips. This can be both comforting and uncomfortable.

We live in a world where people can know what we show them, but God knows what is beneath the surface. People may know our name, but God

knows our story .People may know our appearance, but God knows our heart .People may know our successes, but God knows our struggles. He knows our weaknesses and our strengths, he knows our faults . God knows what is hidden behind the smiles, the persona, the outward appearance, God knows the parts of us we try to hide, yet He does not walk away. And still, with the knowledge of warts and all God loves us.. We can encounter God through our brokenness, and he is there in the midst of that brokenness, drawing us closer to him

Secondly, he never leaves us. David says:“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?”in verse 7 There is no time in our lives where God is absent from us. There can be times, when we separate ourselves from God’s love for various reasons disappointment, rejection, grief, or failure, but God is still there.

There is a lovely stained-glass window in an ecumenical conference Chapel near Geneva, The picture is very simple but very powerful, it is the hand of God reaching out inviting us to take and hold that hand, and reminding us that wherever we are in life, God is there, he is part of it, and he will never leave us.

Sometimes the greatest encounter with God happens when we discover that He was with us in the place when we thought He had left us. Joseph discovered it in prison. Daniel discovered it in the lions' den. The disciples discovered it in the storm. And David discovered it in the vastness of God's presence. You are never outside the reach of God.

The third section speaks of God’s creative work in us

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.” Berse 13 , then goes on to say “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Each of us have been created through the love of God and for a purpose, our lives have a value because our Creator intentionally made us.

We live in a material and secular world, where we are seen by who and what we do, where we live, what we wear. We can be defined by our achievements, possessions, appearance, education, mistakes, or failures. But our deepest identity is not determined by any of those things.

The psalm is not saying I praise you because everything about my life is perfect.” That’s not going to happen in real life, but we can say

You belong to the God who created you. "I praise you because of what You have done in creating me."

It gives us that spiritual belonging. There may be things about ourselves that we struggle to accept. God changes the questions. Instead of asking:

"Am I good enough?" "Am I successful enough?" "Do people approve of me?"

We begin asking :God, what do you want from me, How can I live the life that you intended me to live. How can I love and serve you more.

. The psalm ends with one of the most powerful prayers in Scripture:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!" in verse 23. David starts the psalm by saying you know me, he is now asking God to search him. In inviting God to search us is a way of reflection and accepting ourselves just as we are. Asking what is in the depth of my heart, how I can change to love you more. This is where the real encounter with God starts. It is here where we are transformed through our encounters with God. This is where we can grow spiritually, where our relationship and knowledge of God deepens our understanding of ourselves enfolding by the God who knows, loves creates and nurtures us.

God seeks us, God welcomes us, God meets us in unexpected places, God calls us , God's word is near , God becomes our God , God sustains us God dwells among us , God meets us in silence and struggle , God is with us even in our darkness God knows us completely. God loves us.

Before the ordination service, the Bishop delivers her charge (bishop's address to the diocese about where the Church is, what God is calling it to do, and what the bishop wants clergy and congregations to focus on.) Bishop Sarah included a phrase, given to her in her charge given from the archbishop of Canterbury. She emphasised that it is not who we are, it is who's we are. All of us that morning were meeting changes in our lives as we became Deacons and Priests, in some way our identity was changing, but what was important was that we were living the calling that God had created us for and in that calling we were rooted in our belonging to God.

We do not have to go looking for a distant God. Throughout Scripture, God is the one who comes near: in a garden, at a meal, on a journey, in the wilderness, in a storm, in exile, and ultimately in Jesus. Our task is to recognise

his presence, receive his love, and respond by loving God and our neighbour.
Remember who's we are, we belong to God

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