

Psalm 139 1-14

- ¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- ⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
- ¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

Worship on the Worry-ship – Psalm 139

An all-seeing God who knows us

O lord, you have searched me and you know me

What a thing it is to be known. Not just a surface level, acquainted, but truly known... and accepted.

Jasper, my eldest son, is just coming to the end of his first year at secondary school and it's led me to reflect on my own experience of that time. I had come from a cozy little choir school, trotting around Oxford colleges in mortar boards and gowns, cassocks and ruffs and moved to a big, burly secondary school. This was a significant culture shock. There was no high tea, the 'ruff' I experienced was spelt entirely differently and there seemed to be very few boys, but rather a lot of 'men'. Indeed, some of them looked as if they had just

dropped their kids off on the way into school, so florid were the sideburns and facial hair they were sporting. They soon picked up on the fact that I was more than a little way off such development, and so for many years (and even in some contexts to this day) I was known as 'Nick' [*said with high pitched voice*].

The social currency was also very different, moving from which is your favourite of Handel's Oratorios, to which rugby team you played in. I have to tell you that I found this a real struggle. One close friend did move with me, but in such a huge year I rarely saw him and as a 13 year old boy, making new friends in a significant transition, I couldn't say that I felt particularly known... I was also really very quiet and painfully shy.

A major change came when I went on a Christian camp in North of Wales and, amongst a host of activities including kayaking, gorge-walking and mountain climbing, I listened to a talk and I realised that, in an unsettled sea of transition, I was known, I was loved and I was accepted. Accepted for who I was, no matter which team I was in, no matter what my hair looked like (I was trying to cultivate an epic pair of curtains at the time), no matter which school crew or friendship group I was in, I was loved.

It is not an understatement to say that this realisation transformed me. The shackles were off and I when I went back to school I went with a new confidence and I still benefit from that today. Whether I am doing silly things like getting my ear pierced at the age of 39 or 'Dad-dancing' to the music in the tent at Valley Day yesterday evening, I am unshackled by what others may think of me because I know I am known, loved and accepted.

I can have confidence rooted not in something transient and passing like my own ability, but in a firm foundation as it talked about in this psalm. The first 6 verses are all about an all-seeing God who knows us, knows what we think (good or bad!), knows what we are going to say (good or bad!).... Looks at all of that and thinks – Nick, I still love you.

I am still blown away by that, and join with the psalmist in thinking 'such knowledge is too wonderful for me'!

An all-present God who surrounds us

If the first 6 verses of the psalm are about an all-seeing God who knows us, verses 7-12 are about an all-present God who surrounds us.

If I go up to the heavens, you are there.

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

I suspect we all know the feeling.

We wake up, it's dark.

We roll over and look at the alarm clock or tap the screen of our phone.

It's 2 am. Often to the exact minute.

Our brain is already whirring, filled with worry but in the middle of the night there is no one to debrief with, to confide in, to decompress with. Or at least... No one willing to do any of those things!

I think the psalmist knew this time too!

Saying "*surely the darkness will hide me*".

We feel all alone... But we are not!

One of the earliest pieces of research I did at the University Of Southampton used a tool called Google Trends. We had seen that searches for vitamin D peaked during winter months but I started to look at other terms and the profile of their searches over 24 hour period. Some things were as expected, "dinner" searches peaked in the late afternoon, "breakfast" in the morning but when I moved onto medical terms and symptoms I made a startling discovery. For a great number of them including pain, anxiety, worry there was a very clear 24-hour pattern which was replicated on every day of the week. However, the peak was not as it had been for meals in the morning or the evening but sharply at between 2 and 3 am.

There are number of reasons for this, including hormone levels (the fact that cortisol is at its lowest point or nadir at that time), the fact that it is the moment during a 24 hour period when people turn to the internet for answers because there is no one else around to ask or speak to, but an important takeaway for me was that huge numbers of people were tossing and turning, worrying about finances, work, family, friends at 2 am in the morning. One major cause of 2-am syndrome for me in the last few months has been related to a job that I was applying for, which felt like a great fit, a great opportunity (to work discovering treatments for patients with rare diseases) but my application just did not seem to be going anywhere. (In fact, the radio silence from the company was so deafening that I emailed a number of times with increasingly elaborate excuses for contacting including....)

This led to MULTIPLE 2am moments as I navigated the uncertainty, excitement, considered the disappointment of the situation.

But what can we actually do about it?

Well, as I have already said, I suspect that the psalmist was familiar with 2am syndrome. One of the interesting things about it is that, whatever you were worrying about almost certainly feels better in the morning, or even when the light comes. In fact, I often find I fall asleep again once I see first light. This is echoed in the psalm when it says "even the

darkness will not be dark” with the Lord! Indeed, “the night will shine like the day”. We can have confidence in a God who surrounds us, guides our path and lights our way. And in the case of 2am syndrome, shines a light on our worries.

(Gandalf “Look to my coming at first light on the 5th day” at the battle of Helm’s Deep before leading a cavalry charge to destroy the Uruk-Hai forces of Saruman. It is a similar arrival to the sun coming to our rescue in a sea of worry.)

We know that we are not alone, but have a Father who is all-present and surrounds us in love.

Hallelujah anyway – Worship anyway

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Our response, quite correctly, to this God who knows us, who surrounds us, is to praise. To offer up gratitude, thanks and worship.

This is easy to do when things are going well, when the sun is shining and the world is all as it should be. But what about, like at 2am in the morning, when it is not?

My friend Chris has taught me to respond to the trials and tribulations of life by saying “Hallelujah anyway” and this is a hugely important point. Worship, in whatever form, is not just to be performed in a celebratory atmosphere, but should be a constant attitude in our lives, even, or in fact particularly, when the going gets tough.

Indeed the move to proclaim ‘hallelujah’ in a difficult situation can remind us that:

- a) we are not alone but surrounded
- b) we have so many blessings in our lives to be grateful for.

Imagine if this was our reaction: worry leading to worship.

The worry of will I get that job, will my finances improve, will England win the World Cup leading to “hallelujah anyway”!

Worship is a muscle and, very similar to the way that Alfie demonstrated the benefits of training to be able to perform 100 press ups at Café Church last week, we need to train the muscle of worship.

My experiences and my growth and faith have led me to an appreciation of worship and I have been reflecting on exactly what worship is.

Worship is beyond tradition

Here in the Itchen Valley, we are a wonderfully diverse church and our traditions vary. I have been lucky to actively engage with forms of worship from a number of those traditions.

As that ruff wearing chorister at New College, Oxford I rehearsed six days a week and sang in services five nights per week. This really ignited a love of English church music including Hubert Parry, Herbert Howells, Purcell and Handel.

In my teens, I went to a church youth group and learned to appreciate the band-led worship of Tim Hughes, Matt Redman and Delirious.

All are different forms of worship and all are equally valid. Indeed, this version of Psalm 150 by Charles Villiers Stanford reminds us of the manifold ways and instruments we can employ in praise and worship...

Stanford, Psalm 150 – Praise

Worship is beyond us.

When we worship, we are turning our face towards God and glorifying, showing gratitude and praise to our heavenly father.

One of the most incredible demonstrations of worship I have ever seen occurred at Glastonbury and was led by the grime artist Stormzy.

Now I'm sure you are all very well-versed in the South London grime scene but Stormzy, a Christian, led 100,000 people in singing his song 'Blinded by your grace' with the first verse stating 'Lord I've been broken, although I'm not worthy, you fix me, now I'm blinded by your grace, you came to save me! This is the live recording.

Stormzy

What an amazing phenomenon to hear that enormous choir praising God for his amazing Grace.

Worship is beyond music.

We do not need music to worship.

Recently, I was in Paris for a conference and, on an evening run, I collided with Notre Dame Cathedral at 6 pm. There stood the beautiful cathedral, built and restored to the glory of God and from it emanated a heavenly cacophony of bells... I was enraptured, entranced, I felt the sounds reverberating through me and was transported to another place. It truly felt like an experience of heaven touching earth.

Notre dame recording

But worship is beyond even sound.

As a student I led on a Christian in sport camp in my summer holiday and it was there that I was introduced to the amazing life of the runner Eric Liddle, an athlete of incredible faith who refused to break the Sabbath by running in the 100m at the Paris Olympics on a Sunday but won running in his non-preferred 400m distance anyway and who's life is depicted in the film 'Chariots of fire'.

He famously said "God made me to run fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure".

What we can take away from this is that when we use the gifts we have been given by God we are worshipping he and it gives him great pleasure.

When we perform to the best of our ability at school, college or work, we give him pleasure.

When we share the use the gift of friendship to reach out to someone going through a hard time, we give him pleasure

When the Martyr Worthy Rafting crew use their strength and determination to come second in the Valley Day Raft race, they give him pleasure

So, worship is an outpouring of praise that is beyond tradition, beyond music and beyond us.

Whether worship comes through Stanford or Stormzy, ringing bells or running, the heart of worship is turning towards the God who already knows us, surrounds us and made us.

So when we next have a moment at 2 am, remember two things.

You are not alone, you are known and surrounded.

Sing hallelujah anyway