

It is strange how particular passages of scripture can set off particular memories. Whenever I see Psalm 139 coming up in the lectionary my mind goes back to one afternoon, visiting in the Ballykeel estate in Ballymena. I had called on a parishioner who had recently gone for tests and I had heard the results had not been good. I was brought in and handed a Bible opened at Psalm 139. ‘Before we say anything sir, would you just read that to me.’ We went on to talk about his hopes and fears for the future, for his wife. ‘But one thing I know,’ he said, ‘is that God will be with me thorough all of this.’

It is this sense of God’s presence as reflected in this psalm that I just want to reflect on this morning.

1 O Lord, you have searched me | out and | known me; ♦

Do I go looking for God – or does God come looking for me? I suppose as we look back on life there is an element of both. We see this in the Old Testament stories of the Patriarchs. In the stories we encounter them as real human beings with all the strengths and weaknesses of our humanity. As the stories unfold, God works in and through them, even in their moments of failure,

Looking at our Old Testament Lesson, which is on your service sheet but we have not read it today, I think of Jacob at Bethel; on the run; on the run from his brother Esau, whom he has cheated out of his birth right, on the run from God, on the run from himself. In the stillness of the desert night at Bethel, he hears God’s promise in a dream; a promise of descendants but also the promise: ‘I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.’

- 6 Where can I go then | from your | spirit? ♦
 Or where can I | flee | from your | presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, | you are | there; ♦
 if I make the grave my bed, | you are | there | also.

And Jacob awakes and thinks ‘Surely the Lord was in this place and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.’

This is the gate of heaven. These moments of encounter with the other, points of intersection between my world, my concerns, my hopes and fears, my regrets and celebrations and the eternal: they so often come unawares, almost despite myself.

My mind turns to two dejected followers of Jesus, trudging the road to Emmaus. They had had enough, they were getting out. All their hopes and excitement seemed to die in that tortured, humiliated body left to die on a cross. Uninvited a stranger joins them on the road. Something happens along that road in the talking, in the listening, in the understanding and they come to realise that God was with them on that road. That road becomes a place of meeting with a God they thought had gone. The Jerusalem they left was a place of despair, the Jerusalem they return to is a place of hope.

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 Or where can I | flee | from your | presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, | you are | there; ♦
 if I make the grave my bed, | you are | there | also.

I sometimes get out a copy of the poem ‘The Hound of Heaven’ by Francis Thompson. It is the story of one who would seek hope, happiness, meaning, fulfilment in anything other than God.

I fled Him down the nights and down the days
I fled Him down the arches of the years
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears
I hid from him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped and shot precipitated
Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears
From those strong feet that followed, followed after
But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat, and a Voice beat,
More instant than the feet:
All things betray thee who betrayest me.

Flee as he might into sources of hope and meaning in life:

Fear wist not to evade and Love wist to pursue.

An awareness of the presence at his shoulder:

Still with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following feet, and a Voice above their beat:
Nought shelters thee who wilt not shelter Me.

With the chase comes a growing awareness of the one who follows, one who loves beyond all human loving, one who gives hope and meaning to life:

Halts by me that Footfall.
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
Ah, Fondest, Blindest, Weakest,

I am He whom thou seekest.

Thou dravest Love from thee who dravest Me.

And Jacob awakes and thinks ‘Surely the Lord was in this place and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.’

- 10 If I say, ‘Surely the | darkness will | cover me ♦
and the light a|round me | turn to | night,’
11. Even darkness is no darkness with you;
the night is as | clear as the | day; ♦
darkness and light to | you are | both a|like.
- 23 Search me out, O God, and | know my | heart; ♦
try me | and ex|amine my | thoughts.

Let us rest in the presence of the God who seeks us, who searches us out. the God who knows me, truly knows me, who loves me in my strengths and in my inadequacies, who knows my hopes, who feels my pain.

I will close with the words of a blessing that has spoken to me more and more over the years.

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:
let him lead you each day into the quiet place
of your heart, where he will speak with you;
know that he watches over you –
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,
that he is with you always,
wherever you are and however you may feel:
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be upon you and remain with you always.
Amen.