

20th July, 2014

Reading: Genesis 28: 10 – 19

Psalm 139

Sermon: No Escape

Psalm 139 is many people's favourite Psalm. It's certainly among my favourites. For me, it has a bit of competition in Psalm 46: **God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.**

In many ways, though, there is a similarity between the two Psalms. Like Psalm 46, Psalm 139 is a comfortingly reassuring Psalm in which the Psalmist states that we can never escape from God's presence.

He is aware that even the darkness cannot hide him from God because **darkness is as light to God. The darkness is not dark to God. The night, he says, will shine like the day.**

Psalm 139 has lovely words but it was written at a time of persecution, which is probably not something that the majority of us think about when we read it.

When we hear of the situation between Gaza and Israel and between the Ukrainians and the Russian separatists, can we imagine the Jews or the Christians or the Muslims in those countries sitting down and writing such a Psalm? They too live in countries where persecution is rife but I can't help wondering if they feel abandoned by God. The writer of Psalm 46 was able to say: **The God of Jacob is with us.** The God who was with the betrayer is with us.

The latter verses of the Psalm may resonate more with the persecuted of those lands. In Psalm 139, we see the desperation of the Psalmist. The Psalmist wants to be left in peace. **Away from me those of you who are bloodthirsty! Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord...? I have nothing but hatred for them: I count them my enemies.**

He speaks of his anxious thoughts. **Test me and know my anxious thoughts.** This is not a man who is at peace in the world and yet he is a man who is incredibly dependent on God and who has gained an insight into God's character, which he may never have had if his life had been plain sailing.

What is incredible is that despite his hatred of his persecutors, this man has no desire for retaliation. **Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.** He is looking for peace. He is desperate not to be sucked in to the way of

persecution and retaliation. He wants peace. He wants to walk the path to everlasting life.

It may well be that this is one of the Psalms which was written when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. You'll remember the words of the Boney-M hit: How can we praise the Lord's Name in a strange land?

In exile, the Jews felt far removed from the House of God, from Jerusalem, which is why they struggled to praise God and yet in Psalm 139, we see the insight that has been gained by the Psalmist.

Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

In Psalm 46, the Psalmist has the same sense of God's presence. **We will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea...The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

In our reading from Genesis 28, we see Jacob receiving the same insight. Jacob has fled from home following his betrayal of his father and his brother. He is in fear of his life and justifiably so. His brother has threatened to kill him.

He lies down exhausted and dreams of a ladder reaching from heaven to earth and of angels going up and down it. In his dream, his future is assured. His safety is guaranteed and in the morning he says: **Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.** In the midst of nowhere, Jacob finds the house of God and he finds peace. We hear echoes of Psalm 139. Jacob realises that he cannot escape God's presence.

Psalm 139 taken as a whole is about the sacredness of human life and it challenges us to open ourselves up to God that He might examine our thoughts, our actions and our motives.

When we look at the situation in the Ukraine and between Israel and Gaza, we cannot but wish that the powers that be in those lands would do just that, that they would realise the sacredness of human life and stop destroying it, that they would realise how precious life is, much more so than land and power.

But to look at others and to wish that they would do something is to fall into a trap. This Psalm is not about others. It is about ourselves. The Psalmist didn't ask God to examine the hearts of

others. He asked God to examine his heart, to search within him for anything, which would be offensive to God.

The whole purpose of that exercise is twofold. In the first instance, it is so that with that awareness of what is within ourselves, we will endeavour to stop hurting others, to stop the petty squabbles, to stop what on a grander scale leads to the escalation of wars.

Greed and power are two of the characteristics, which got Jacob into bother. He had to flee for his life because Esau, his brother, was going to retaliate for the way he had been treated.

Human life is more important than land and power. It is not uncommon for families to split because of squabbles over who is inheriting what. Is granny's teapot of more value than the relationship we share with our siblings? What is happening in Gaza and Israel and the Ukraine happens on a smaller scale in our own homes. We may not blow each other apart but we blow our families apart and our friendships apart over issues, which may seem important but which in the scheme of things are nothing.

The other reason for opening our hearts to God and allowing God to examine what is within them is so that that there may be nothing which stands between us and eternal life.

No matter how bad life gets, and it can be awful at times, not just on a world scale but on an individual scale, no matter how bad it is our readings today encourage us to remember that wherever we are, whether we are at home or abroad, whether we are in some isolated, terrifying place, whether we have done something awful or whether we are on the receiving end of another's cruelty, God is with us. God's house is where you are.

With that knowledge, we can draw comfort and strength in any situation. With that knowledge we can find peace whatever is happening around us or to us. With that knowledge we can repeat the words of Psalm 139 as if they were our own.

The Psalmist said: **When I awake, I am still with you.** Awake or asleep, the God of Jacob is with you.