

Being Known

Ps 139 is one of my all-time favourite psalms. It struck me while reading it through that it is about knowledge. But its focus is not on what we know, but on the fact that we are known. The psalmist is quite clear: there is One who is not terrified of the empty darkness within us. That One can stay in touch with that darkness, and gently dispel it with pure light. That One knows us totally. There is no knowledge about us that is hidden from that One, because that is the One who made us.

St Paul says things that are related to this idea too. At the end of I Cor 13 Paul makes it clear that what is primary is not our knowing but our being known. He wrote: then I shall know even as also I am known. Paul understood that his hunger to know, the very idea of knowing, has its roots here, in the fact that God knows him more fully, more perfectly than any knowledge he, Paul, could ever aspire to.

But the kind of knowing that Paul aspires to is not limited to the technological knowing about how we work as biological machines. God's knowing embraces our hopes and dreams, our achievements and our aspirations, our disappointments and our longings, our anger, our obsessions and our shame.

Paul's journey as a Christian began with an incident that has a similar flavour. On that road to Damascus he had a vision of Christ in which Jesus asked him: Saul, why are you persecuting me? I re-read that story recently and was struck by what it implied. We talk sometimes – perhaps not often enough – about our relationship with God, but we hardly ever talk about God's relationship with us. Yet we know perfectly well that to be a relationship two persons are involved, and each has his or her own view of the relationship. A relationship with another human being "means something" to us. We value their friendship, delight in their company. A colleague may challenge us and inspire us to achieve of our very best. Another colleague may be a bully, abusing his or her position of power, leaving our lives in shreds. Whatever it is we have a reaction to that relationship. It "means something" to us. Paul's account of his experience on the road to Damascus reminds us that there is a "God" end to our relationship with God as well as an "us" end.

These two episodes in Paul's life underline the fact that the Psalmist in Ps 139 isn't trying to draw us into dangerous introspection, that concentration on ourselves that is certainly capable of being perverse and destructive. The psalmist is holding before us the assurance that whoever we are, whatever our preoccupations with external things, whatever secrets we are determined to hide even from those closest to us, God knows and understands our innermost being.

But the psalmist is saying more than that. We sometimes remark that knowledge is power. There's an old radio comedy cliché in which one character says to the audience something like this: "Little does he know that I know that

the secret file is in the brown briefcase, not the black one." Perhaps that's why we don't feel comfortable being known in such detail. The psalmist, however, affirms that this startlingly intimate knowledge is never a threat to us. On the contrary, God's knowledge of us is always a support and a strength.

Paul again refers to this intimacy in terms of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit speaks with our Spirit, he writes, and it is clear this conversation is at the depths of our being, quite out of our conscious reach, not susceptible to any of the reserve or caution that dominate our public lives. And what is the subject of this conversation? Why, that we are children of God. Treasured children, regardless of that darkness within. God longs for us to acknowledge that we know that he knows, and that we understand his knowledge of us to be grounded in his love, not in his judgement.

One gift of the Spirit is to say to us: I know who you are; I know you through and through. I know you far, far better than you know yourself. But have no fear. My knowledge of you will always be used to support you when your path becomes hard and perilous. My knowledge of you will always be used to calm you when anxieties gather on every side. My gift to you is peace such as you will discover nowhere else. My knowledge of you will be the source of wisdom for you.