

# Psalm 139

Alison Morgan, Holy Trinity Leicester, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008



## Prayer

Lord as we come to listen to you this morning may we learn to let you search us and know us, and lead us in the way everlasting. Amen.

## Introduction

Good morning. This is my kind of goodbye sermon. We move house in 10 days' time, although we don't finally leave till the end of August. So I may be a bit more personal than usual...

Today we are looking at Psalm 139, which is a very personal psalm. But I want to start not with the personal bit, but with the psalm itself. Being a psalm, this is a poem. And that does make a difference. It seems to me that if we are to take hold of what God is saying to us through his word, we must pay careful attention to the form in which that word comes. And here it comes not as a piece of prose but as a poem. More particularly, as a psalm, or sung poem. So let's start by asking ourselves, what is the difference between poetry and prose?

1. Well, the most obvious one is the external shape of the thing. Prose comes in straight lines, poetry comes in verse form. Prose goes on and on, poetry is usually much shorter. Prose follows a logical line of thought, poetry tends to jump around. Prose is grammatically orthodox, poetry can break the rules. Prose explains, poetry evokes. Those are some of the ways in which we recognise a piece of writing as a poem, and a poem is what we have here. Poems do different things from prose – just think of the line, *there was a young lady from Leicester...* Could you fit that into Romans? No? I rest my case.

2. So if we note that there is a difference between poetry and prose, then perhaps we can go further than just looking at what that difference consists of, and ask the question, why did the author choose this particular form? And here I think we begin to get closer. There are exceptions to this within particular historical periods, but as a general rule poetry is

an outflowing of the emotions, and not an explanation from the mind. The most famous definition of poetry is probably Wordsworth's. He said *poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity*.

3. And yet that still isn't quite enough. We recognise a poem because it has a certain physical structure. As we look further we find that it is essentially concerned with the poet's feelings and not with explanation. But what about the *reader*? When you listen to someone else's feelings it builds relationship, and both parties benefit from that in different ways. But why spend time reading dead people's feelings? I think because the third thing which defines a poem is that it is meant to do something for us personally. A poet wants to take us where he has been, to help us to identify our own emotions or even to provoke emotion in us. He doesn't want to teach us, he wants to move us.

	Prose	Poetry
Shape	linear logical plain longer	verse form intuitive ornamented shorter
Subject	thoughts	feelings <i>emotion recollected in tranquillity</i>
Purpose	to explain to teach to persuade	to evoke to move to inspire

When I was at school we studied the poets of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Those poems were written by men who wanted to come to terms with their feelings by expressing them on paper; they were cathartic, to use the technical term. But they were also written to move *us*, to enable *us* to experience some of the horrors of life in the trenches, and to instil in *us* the conviction that this must happen no more. And they are still effective, so effective that we were able to write our own war poems in response. Poetry allows the emotions to speak to the mind, rather than the mind to the emotions, which is the way we usually do it. A poem isn't doctrine, it doesn't teach, it doesn't explain. A poem feels. It is the language of the soul.

And so what of this psalm? I won't go on about the form much because we aren't reading it in the original. I was once told by a friend who read Hebrew that the psalms are breathtakingly beautiful in their expression. We don't have access to that, because a poem in translation is really no more than someone else's explanation of the poem.

So let's think about the second characteristic of a poem. A poem is *the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity*. Let's look at verse 19. Now we all know this psalm. It is one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament. And what we know about it is that it is very reassuring. God made you. He knitted you together in your mother's womb He knows your every passing thought, and he knows everything that will happen to you. God is with you, and we think of this psalm and quote it to other people when we need reminding of that fact.

But when we look at it more closely we find that at verse 19 the nice meditation suddenly stops, and we get this. Kill the wicked! Get rid of them! I hate them! I loathe them! They are your enemies and mine! Now it isn't nice any more, and our comfortable understanding of the psalm suddenly won't do. It would do if verses 19 to 22 weren't there, and we tend indeed to forget that they are. But here they are. So what do we do with them? I think the thing we most often do is to skate over them in some perplexity, feeling that perhaps here the psalmist goes again on one of those Old Testament anger trips demanding death and destruction to enemies. We know better now; Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and so perhaps it's OK to ignore these verses. If you are an Old Testament scholar instead of an ordinary person, you don't do this; you suggest that the psalm clearly shows two different literary forms, and must therefore have been two separate works which have been joined together, and so that gives you a very respectable justification for throwing away verses 19 to 22 - though you will of course want to keep 23 and 24, because they clearly round it off by coming full circle to the beginning.

But I don't think we should rush into either of these solutions too lightly. There is clearly an inconsistency between happy reflection on God's providence and the screaming anger of the end. Now I find that one of the exciting things about the Bible is that if we let the text speak for itself, it becomes so much more powerful than if we try to fit it into our preconceptions. So let's start here with the inconsistency. Let's throw away the rational approach we bring with us to a piece of prose, and let's take Wordsworth as our guide. If Wordsworth is right, in a poem we get two things. One is strong emotion. The other is subsequent reflection. I suggest that the emotion is to be found in verses 19 to 22, the reflection in the rest.

## Springboard: anger

So let's start with verses 19 to 22, the uncomfortable verses. David is screaming. He is screaming in fury. This poem wasn't written in a moment of quiet philosophical reflection one summer afternoon in the garden. It rose up from his soul on a tide of anger. He feels himself to be surrounded by wicked people. Bloodthirsty people. Malicious, slanderous, evil-scheming, godless people. People who oppose both God and the people of God. He feels threatened and outraged. And he screams his hatred, his anguish and his despair at God.

So the psalm leaps off a springboard of pain. It isn't about how to thank God for the good things he has given you at all, it's about how to pray when things are going wrong. It isn't about you and God when things are going well, it's about

you and God when you see wickedness all around you. It's about how to handle your anger and how to come to God in your agony. If only you would slay the wicked, David laments. If only, if only.

Do you have any *if only*s? If only the atmosphere wasn't so awful at work. If only your friends didn't take the mickey. If only your parents hadn't got divorced. If only you hadn't been made redundant. If only you weren't afflicted with this pain, this disability, this illness. If only you hadn't been robbed. If only you weren't so lonely. If only your partner or your family weren't so difficult. If only you had a bit more money. If only people would stop making so many demands on you. If only the system weren't so corrupt. If only God would do what he's supposed to and protect the innocent and throw spanners in the works of the wicked. *Why is life like this? Why do I have such a hard time when the selfish and the ungodly flourish in their wickedness? Why doesn't God do something?*

The problem with *If only* is that it leads to *why*. And *why* has no answer.

So David doesn't start with *why*. And he doesn't ask what God is going to do about it, which are the two natural questions. He starts somewhere else. In fact he doesn't start with his situation at all. He starts with God. And he asks three questions. They aren't to do with himself or the situation at all. They are all to do with God.

1. Who is God?

2. Where is God?

3. What does God do?

Let's look at them in turn.

## 1. Who is God?

So David doesn't start with the problem. He starts with God, and with his own relationship to God. Who is God, and who is David? This is the question David asks and answers in verses 1 to 6.

*O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.*

So to start with, God is the one who knows David. He knows everything he does, everything he thinks and everything he is. So it is with you. Everything you do, God sees. Everything you think, God reads. He knows how you will act and react in all circumstances. He knows what you will say before you say it. He is behind you and before you. It sounds a bit like Big Brother, or at the very least like a nosy neighbour, doesn't it. Can't set my foot outside the front door without the net curtains tweaking at the window, can't get away from the policeman's hand on my shoulder, can't escape from the CCTV and the speed cameras. But I don't think that's how David means it. God doesn't control, he *knows*. He hems you in behind - he knows your past, where you are coming from, and he has dealt with it. He hems you in before - he knows your future, where you are going, and he will protect you in it.

Now I don't know about you but I want to be known, and yet I am afraid of it. Someone once said that your best friend is the person who knows you through and through and still loves you. We all want to be known. We crave intimacy and understanding. And yet we know our own failings and so we fear it, or we fear rejection when they are found out.

We are about to move from Leicester, after 18 years. For the last 12 of those years I have met for an evening once a month with a group of friends, some from this church, some from elsewhere; but all Christians. We've eaten together and taken it in turns to lead the evening. A couple of weeks ago they all took me out for a goodbye meal. We had a wonderful time; and then they all stood up one by one and said how much they had valued my friendship over the years. Each one said something different, and I did my best to look as if this was a perfectly normal occurrence, and in fact as if I weren't there at all really. And as I looked at them I thought, you lot *know* me. I travel around the country a lot, and I go once or twice a year to work in dioceses in Africa. There I go with a *persona*, I play a role. But among those women I am known. We have brought up our children together, cried together, laughed together, prayed together. Some of them I have known for 24 years, since we first came to the Midlands. And still they tell me they love me. Now I am leaving, and going to Somerset. That's a weird feeling; because there I will not be known. It will bring a kind of freedom; but a vacuum too. There is a kind of security in having been known for such a long time. You don't have to pretend. You can just be.



Friends are wonderful, and essential, and we find great security in being known by them, known for who we are. But there is more available to us than that. The only person who knows you completely from the beginning of your life to now and beyond is God. He's been watching you every day of your life. Through the bad things, through the mistakes and the agonies; and also through the good things, the joys and adventures. And he knows that all those experiences have contributed to the person you are now. God knows all that, he understands all that, and what's more he knows and understands the future just as well. As my friends have walked beside me, so has the God who made me – for longer, more completely, and with a far deeper commitment. *How* and *why* is a mystery which I cannot understand; and yet there's great comfort in it and great security too.

## 2. Where is God?

So that's *who* God is. He's the one that knows you and everything about you, the one who is always with you. David's next question, very relevant in his time of anger and trouble, is *where* is God? Verses 7 to 12.

*Where can I go from your Spirit? 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. If I say, 'surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me', even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

Where is God. This is a question we all have to struggle with at one time or another. I remember my daughter Bethy at the age of three. *God's everywhere, isn't he Mummy.* Yes Bethy. *But you can't see him can you Mummy.* No Bethy. *That's because he's hiding.*

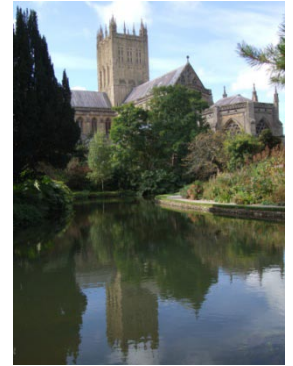
But she's right, isn't she. God is everywhere, and yet we can't see him. If I go up he's there. If I go down he's there. If I go east he's there. If I go west he's there - Jonah found that one out. He's there in the dark, and he's there in the light. And this too is a mystery beyond our understanding. So when you feel close to him in prayer, he's there. When you feel suicidal and distant, he's still there. When you feel like fleeing from responsibility, he's there. When you feel like hiding your guilt in the dark, he's there. When you feel angry as the ungodly prosper and you flounder, he's there with you just the same. Wherever you go, whatever your circumstances, he's there.

I sat in a vehicle in Zambia a few weeks ago, and went to sleep. As I slept it seemed to me that God was saying, why have you so often not believed that I am always with you, that I truly want to bless you? For I do. And I woke up surprised, and thought, yes, here I am 5000 miles from home in a rattling vehicle with a fuel tank which keeps falling off.



And here are you too, Lord. Wherever I go, there you are with me. I didn't want to go to Zambia this time; there was too much going on here, what with work things and moving things. And yet when I woke up again I knew that I was meant to be there, not just to do a job for God – I knew that before I went - but because I needed to be there for me too, to take some space, to deal with some stuff, to make a transition. And after nearly half a century of struggling and obeying, maybe at last I am ready to believe that wherever I go, God goes with me; and that that's not just for his benefit but for mine also.

We are about to move to Wells in Somerset. There are all sorts of practical reasons why we are moving to Wells. But we are moving there not least because that seems to be the place God is taking us. For you we are going, and for some of you that is sad. It's sad for us too. But others coming in our stead, and God will bless you as you welcome them. And we are going to a place that for me, although I have never lived there, feels like the place God has chosen for me. I stood in the High Street a year ago when I was doing some work there, thinking why does this feel like home? It was a powerful feeling, because all my life I have wanted to live somewhere that feels like home. And suddenly I found myself being introduced, there in the street, to the bishop. And God said see – I'm planning something here. Lots more things happened, and by February I was sitting in the cathedral, depressed because we couldn't seem to find either a house for ourselves or an office for ReSource. But the choir sang Psalm 84, where it talks about travelling through the valley of Baca and finding wells of living water. Wells is called Wells because there *is* a well of living water, bubbling up hot from underground beside the cathedral. It was in fact the first place in England to have taps. And sure enough, we found a house and Christine found an office. It's a good place for ReSource to be based, as we seek the source of living water, the springs of life which will refresh the church. Some of you don't want us to go. But let me quote to you from Psalm 16, given to me recently through someone I was praying with: *The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.* As we came, so we go; and we go because he goes with us.



### 3. What does God do?

Third question. What does God do. Verses 13 to 18.

This is the famous passage. *You created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

What does God do? Answer: he creates life. And this is the biggest mystery of all. *It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.* 14 years ago I first saw my twins Bethy and Katy, 4 weeks after conception, on an ultrasound scan. Two tiny sacs, and in one of them a little pulse, going throb, throb, throb. They scan you all the time with twins, and as the weeks went by I saw them turn into blobs then arcs then things like fish then minute babies. I felt them move and I saw them put their thumbs in their mouths. I saw they were girls. We chose their names, and I knew which was which, because their personalities were quite different even in the womb. If you have just one baby, you feel it move and you think, yes, baby, that's what they do. But if you have two, you discover they don't do the same as each other even if they're the same sex and the same size. Bethy hardly moved, she stayed curled up down on the right at the bottom. Katy on the other hand thrashed and kicked and punched up here under my ribs. And so when they were born Roger said which one is Bethy, and I said this one, the first one, the still one. And which is Katy? The other one, the wriggly one, the noisy one. And that's what they were like. God knows them. He watched them there even without the ultrasound. He formed their bodies and created their personalities, and he knows their lives. It is God who differentiates cells, God who knits tissues, God who infuses personality. Life is a miracle and a mystery. It cannot even be defined. Try it. I challenge you. Go home and try and come up with a definition of life. Is it growth, soul, heartbeat, consciousness, movement, brain activity, breathing, or having a future or what? And does that

apply to oak trees and wood lice and the earth as well? I actually have a personal definition. I define life as the presence of the Spirit of God within something. So that is why you are alive. Because you have the spirit of God within you. And it was that Spirit who created you.

Defined one way you are a bucket full of water, carbon, iron, calcium and a bunch of other ingredients. Dust, as the Bible puts it. The same stuff you find in the average ploughed field. But defined another way, you are a personal creation of the living God. Just think. Before your conception there were millions of sperm all competing to fertilise one egg. Any one could have got there first, and if it had been any one other than the one it was, you would not be sitting here now. Life is a controlled coincidence, and the controller is God. And the organisation of that life into a tree or a caterpillar is astonishing, never mind a person. Did you know the average large tree has 7 million leaves? Did you know that there are 228 distinct muscles in the head of a caterpillar? Can you command the morning, have you entered the storehouses of the snow, can you bind the stars or provide the raven with its prey or give the horse its might or explain the crocodile, God demanded of Job when he wanted to know the cause of his troubles. Can you? If not, and I think perhaps not, then don't do what Job did and ask why; do what David does and meditate on God, on the mystery and fragility of your life and not on the pain of your circumstances. For it is God who asks the questions, and we who submit the answers. Not the other way around.

## Search me and know me

And so that's where he ends up. Verse 23. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. David is angry. He is surrounded by wicked people. And yet he does not demand answers. He does not ask why is this happening, and he does not ask God what he is going to do about it. He reminds himself of the mystery of the knowledge, the presence and the providence of God, and all he asks is one thing: to be searched and known by the God who made him. To be sure that he himself is not sinning in this situation. To be sure that he himself is not wicked. To be sure that his anger is righteous anger and not self-defensive anger. Do you dare pray that prayer? Search me, O God, and know my heart. It's the only possible response to a God who created you, who knows you, who surrounds you, who travels with you through darkness and light. I challenge you. Pray it. And then listen to the answer.

## So how do we live?

So let's sum it up. How do you cope when life is hard? When the corrupt flourish at work and the righteous do not, when they turn their back on you and compete with you and run you down? When the most selfish people get the best deal, and your life seems to be falling apart?

You will hate them.

You will cry out in anger.

You will contemplate revenge.

And then you will remember the God who knitted you together cell by cell in your mother's womb, and remember that in the mystery of providence and the mystery of evil, he alone has the answers, he alone is there in the distance and the darkness and the pain, in the past, in the present, and also in the future.

For there is a future. In his book were written all the days that were formed for you, when none of them as yet existed.

Including the bad ones.

And you will turn to him, remembering to ask him to continue to create you as you pray, and to ask him to be sovereign in your life, the life that he quite unnecessarily chose to give you.

So if you want to ask why, don't ask why is the world like this. Ask why am I at all. Don't focus on the mystery of suffering. Focus on the mystery of life itself. For that is where you will find God.

## Conclusion

So there you are. That's David's poem, and it wouldn't have half the power it's got if it were written in prose. We started with Wordsworth. Let's end with Keats. This is what Keats said about poetry. *Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.* David's subject was the mystery and incomprehensibility of God. Next time you are filled with anger or despair at the lunacy of it all, go and find this psalm. Read it, pray it, let it enter into your soul, and ask God to lead you in the way everlasting. Amen.

