



27 May 2012
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Psalm 139
John 21 vv. 15–17

O Lord, open our lips: Unto whom all hearts are open

By The Rev'd Professor Jeremy Begbie

Research Professor of Theology, Duke Divinity School, USA

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was staying with my wife's family in Edinburgh. We took a trip into town one afternoon and came back to the house after an hour or so. It was just like many mid-summer afternoons in Edinburgh – cold, wet and grey. Not the kind of day that makes you expect anything unusual. And when we first walked into the house, I didn't notice anything unusual. Until I saw a couple of chairs knocked to one side, a drawer open. And then in the bedroom - pictures squint, papers scattered on the floor, a window shattered. The burglars hadn't taken much, that didn't worry me. What really shook me was the thought that they *knew* about us. They knew us with a chilling intimacy. They'd probably been watching from across the road. They knew our regular routine. They knew when we left in the morning, when we came back. They knew when we ate, when we went to bed, where we sat and where we slept. They *knew*. They were there, silently observing each move, gazing from the outside, vigilant voyeurs, hour after hour. That was the worst part. That's what made me shudder – not what they took, but what they *knew*.

It's the shudder you get in the proverbial English suburb when you move into a new neighbourhood, and the curtains in the window across the road twitch every time you leave the house. The shudder the first-year student gets when she finds out she's been stalked for months by a potential attacker. The shudder of knowing you're known.

The shudder we might have felt when we heard those opening words from Psalm 139:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.”

It's hard not to notice that word 'know' chiming through the opening lines:

“you have searched me and *known* me; you *know* when I sit down and when I rise up”. “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely”.

This God *knows*. There's no privacy with this God. We're exposed.



27 May 2012
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Psalm 139
John 21 vv. 15–17

God knows our violent moodswings, our inbuilt laziness, the wasted hours,

- the words we never dare to speak: ‘how I’d love to get my hands round his throat’, ‘I hope she gets run over by a bus’

- the thoughts we never let out; thoughts of illegal shortcuts in exams, daydreams of sexual conquest, reveries of seduction. The stories we rehearse in our minds, the images of ourselves we nurture to impress whoever’s around. All invented to prevent us facing the truth about ourselves, about who we really are.

Thank goodness no one really knows what we’re really like – except God, of course, who does know; this God “*unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid*”.

And God knows, the psalmist tells us, because God sees.

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Nothing is hidden in the dark from this God: all is illuminated. All is seen.

My *past* – so he writes: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret”. From the day we were born, God has seen it all; every gesture, every unforced error, every word and movement – from the womb to May 27th, 2012. Nothing has gone unnoticed or unseen. All is visible to the all-seeing, unseen, See-er.

Not only my past, also my *future*: “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.” “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.” God knows the opportunities that will come our way, the doors that will open, the chances we’ll have. Future, past and present – they’re an open book to the God who sees.

And God *sees*, the psalmist reminds us, because God is *there* even when we think God is not around, God is there. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” It seems there is no “safe place”, no zone where God isn’t around. Vs. 8 – “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,” God is there.

there when I turn my back on the homeless street person in Market Square;

there when I switch channels to avoid the child pleading for help;

there when I lash out at those I’m meant to love most;

there at every turn, ominously omnipresent;

the ever-present God “from whom no secrets are hid”;

In the words of the Spiritual, “it causes me to tremble”.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jeremy Begbie



27 May 2012
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Psalm 139
John 21 vv. 15–17

Well . . . *me* maybe. But *not* whoever wrote this Psalm. And that's the funny thing. There's not a lot of trembling here. There's no shuddering, no dread. Amazement, yes. Wonder. But not fear. Having this God around doesn't seem to bother him at all. Just the opposite. The mood is upbeat. In fact, in a couple of places he starts *praising* God. What's going on? Let's be honest, this God doesn't sound like the kind of God you want to have much to do with. The God who's always 'on your case', on your back, who's never out of your way. This all-seeing, omnipresent, omniscient God. This writer has *this* God breathing down his neck, and he's so upbeat he's practically elated! Why?

1) First, because the God who knows is the God who knows who's innocent

Take that word "know" which keeps chiming through the psalm; and that word "see", and the word "search". Over and over again in the Old Testament they're words people use when they're *innocent* victims – the penniless peasant kicked off the street by the rich landowner, the owner of the vineyard swindled by the head of the Estate. And people like this want to say: "God knows who's really innocent, God sees how things really are." That's the psalmist here.

Of course, we don't know exactly what's happened to him. But it looks like he's been framed by his enemies. That's why he lashes out at them later. And he knows he's innocent. He's not saying he's perfect; no – he says "search *me*, Lord, search me out if you want, test me out". No; he doesn't assume he's perfect. But he does know that in this matter, he's in the right. This is a cry from the belly of the not-guilty, it's a cry to a *God who knows how things really are*: a God who knows who's in the right and who's in the wrong. And a God who will one day *show* the world he knows.

Many years ago, I heard Desmond Tutu preached here in Cambridge. He told of a morning in the South African apartheid days when he visited a black family in one of the townships. They'd just lost their home in a fire, one of the children was trapped and burned alive. Everyone knew it was the security police who'd started the fire in a row of houses, but the police accused those who lived there of doing it themselves to foment trouble. An appeal was useless. Who'd believe this one little family?

Under the night sky, Tutu knelt in the rubble of the burned home to pray with the father. He struggled for words. And all he could say was: "well, God, at least you know . . . at least you know. And one day, you'll show the world you know." And somehow, Tutu managed to find words to tell the father that there would be a day when he would be vindicated

when communities stripped of all they have would at last be heard,

when the noisy leaders would be silenced and those who had no voice will be singing in the streets,

when every warped truth will be straightened out, every stain of deception wiped clean.

That's why the psalmist is so elated here. That's why he's glowing with confidence – because he knows God knows who's innocent, and he knows God will one day show everybody he knows.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jeremy Begbie



27 May 2012
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Psalm 139
John 21 vv. 15–17

Have you ever stood in that place? In that strange place when all the fingers are turned at you, when everyone around screams we're wrong, but we know just this once you are right.

When someone in your family turns against you for something you never did; they're convinced you're the cause of the problems: "You're the one who stole the money; you're the one who wrecked the relationship; you're the one who made your mother ill, you're the one.....". But you weren't. What can you say? Except – "God, you know....."

Or you're a doctor and you take a life-or-death decision in the hospital ward that turns out to be the wrong one. How well I remember a retired doctor telling me about a diagnosis she made years ago, which turned out to be fatally wrong. She knew she had no choice at the time; she couldn't have done any different. But she'd been under a cloud ever since. What could she say? Except: "God, *you* know; at least you know, and one day, the truth will be known."

This is a *God who knows how things really are*: and one day, all will be clear.

But there's another reason why the psalmist is so radiant, so full of praise:

And it's this.....

2) the God who knows is the God who loves

Imagine you're having a drink with friends one night in the pub. And after an hour or so, as your tongue loosens up a bit in the rising alcoholic haze, and your defences slip. You let loose something very personal, a sexual secret perhaps. And on your way out, in the chilly draft of Trinity Street, you suddenly wonder: "am I safe? I only half know them. I've given them a weapon, and I've only myself to blame if I find it in my back one day." What's that fear? The fear of knowledge without love. When you know somebody knows about you, and you shiver to think they might use that against you. Knowledge without love.

It's the fear many have about the press – the tabloids who can dig up your past and destroy you in a three-inch headline. Information without compassion. Think of witness after witness in the Leveson Inquiry – testifying to knowledge without love.

It's the fear many of us have about the computer revolution, with ever-increasing data-bites shuttling around the ever-accelerating data-lines. Somewhere in all that buzz there may well be data about us, computerised records, personal records, *private* records perhaps. Megabytes of intimacies. What happens if it gets into the wrong hands and one day we find it turned against us? What's the fear? Knowledge without love.

It's the fear many have of the clergy. Clergy. Even Deans and Chaplains. They know dangerously too much. They've heard so many whispered confessions over endless sherries. And sometimes they move in circles where privileged information can get recycled rather too freely. Never here of course. But in some places it happens; and it makes many very edgy about those in dog-collars. The fear of knowledge without love.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Jeremy Begbie



27 May 2012
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Psalm 139
John 21 vv. 15–17

And this fear is worst of all when it gets projected on to *God*. Think of the way we've often made God in this image – a God of knowledge without love, a God who knows everything, comprehends everything comprehensively, holds everything permanently in his all-encompassing Mind. The Big Brother, the Big Other, seeing over all, and seeing through all, missing nothing, stocking it all up. A God who knows . . . *but might not really love us*, so that one day, on the last day, he *might* bring it all out in the open, play it all back in some heavenly video show, to name and shame. Many are in the grip of that kind of God.

But it's an idol! A lie. It's not the God of Psalm 139. This is the God of Israel, who *knows* his people through and through but *also* yearns over them, adores them in all their craziness, holds on to them in all their perversity and rebellion; who *loves* them, yes, loves them inside out. Listen to the Psalm again: "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there. . . ." Even there, what? "Even there God, you'll get me"? No – "even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." Knowledge and love fused together. The God who knows is the God who loves.

Just suppose this were true. And just suppose this God had taken the ultimate step to prove it, to prove that he knows and loves *at the same time*. Suppose this God had come to know us not just from the outside looking in, but from the inside. Suppose he came not just next to us or near us, *as* one of us, as a living, talking, breathing human being – to know us from the inside, literally "inside out". "O Lord, you have searched me and known me" – oh yes, God has. *And* just suppose *at the same time*, as one of us, this human being lives and breathes and talks a kind of love that takes the breath away, a kind of love that won't run away when it finds something ugly in you, a kind of love that builds people up – the serial adulterer, the ageing dropout, the mentally ill teenager – a kind of love that hangs on and holds on whatever it finds, a kind of love that goes all the way to a hideous death in order to reach those who never knew God wanted their company. Jesus Christ – love and knowledge, *God's* love and knowledge, welded together, in one person.

Today is of course Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate God's *Spirit* made available, accessible, so we can discover this fusion of knowledge and love for ourselves, not as an abstract possibility, but as a vibrant reality.

What could be more liberating than to find the Spirit of *this* kind of God?

And what could be more liberating than to find a place where this Spirit is available? Whatever else this Chapel is about in this University in this town, isn't it meant to be a place where academic learning never becomes a weapon to put people down, where malicious gossip gets dumped at the door, where information is never used to hurt, only heal?

A place where those who never believed they could be known *and* loved at the same time, can walk in and sense that here, knowing and loving walk hand in hand: that here, the Spirit of a very particular kind of God is at work, a God in whom knowing and loving are one.

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.