

Wade Street, 9 am, 13.09.15. Ability Sunday. Psalm 139

(A talk based on the passages suggested by the Prospects organisation and adapting a few of their ideas.)

On Wednesday evening I watched the Horizon programme on the origins of the universe, the creation of the first stars after what scientists call 'the dark ages' of the universe. I mainly watched it because Paul is fascinated by anything to do with astro-physics so it was a way of getting him to sit down for an hour! To me the vast numbers – over 100 billion stars in our galaxy, more than 100 billion galaxies - are mind-boggling, and I find it difficult to take in much of the science involved. But what is amazing to me is that God set in motion a process that resulted in a universe (multiple universes??) so beautiful and yet so complex that the greatest human minds are continually challenged by it and recognise that they will never know all there is to know.

At the micro end of the scale, some of you will have had the pleasure of being presented with a picture of a scan of a foetus, perhaps 13 weeks old, and being told, 'that's your grandchild!' Others of us will remember pictures of our own, or friends', unborn children. The Psalmist will have had no idea of that possibility when he wrote, "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". The intricacy of our individual bodies and minds is as amazing as that of the stars and planets. As Ps 139 (v14) says: "We are fearfully and wonderfully made." And people who are (as Janet said) 'born different' are also 'fearfully and wonderfully made' and every person is infinitely precious to God. What struck me as I watched the adults from the Prospects homes reading that Psalm was the joy (in most cases!) with which they said, "I praise you – because I am fearfully and wonderfully made". I felt they were teaching us by the way they read! How many people - young and older - complain about the shape of their nose, the colour of their hair, the size of various parts of their anatomy. How much money is spent on altering or disguising the parts that we're less than happy with (and I'm not suggesting that that's always wrong!)? But many of us have lost the sheer joy of being able to say "I praise you – because I am fearfully and wonderfully made".

Psalm 139 starts with an evocative poetic description of what it means for God to know us completely. And in the reading, the words "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me – you know when I sit down and when I get up - you are familiar with all my ways" came across with a confidence in God's presence that **we** can miss out on. When **we** read that God knows what we're thinking and what we're about to say', it's often with a sense of anxiety. Do I really want God to know about my thoughts and words? But the sense of the

psalm, which goes on to ask, “Where can I go from your Spirit? If I go up to the heavens, you’re there. If I go down to the depths, you’re there as well!” is of God being with us to help us: “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”. Yes, of course we need to check our thoughts and actions against God’s standards, as the end of the psalm reminds us, but God wants to be with us, not to make us feel guilty about our every move and thought, but to reassure us that he is there to take away our fear, anxiety and loneliness. That sense of isolation and anxiety can be quite severe for some people with learning difficulties and it’s important for them (as for all of us) to be assured that God is always there. Organisations like Prospects, which set their support in a Christian context, encourage adults in their faith, and remind them that God is with them, through reading the Bible with them, supporting them in attending church and by promoting Causeway groups such as the one that Liz and Geoff run in Lichfield. I’m certainly grateful for Christian carers for my brother who give themselves to the task, in a non-judgmental way, despite low pay and sometimes very little esteem from the public – and clients who aren’t always good at expressing gratitude!

Verses 19-22 of Ps 139 (which the group did not read) are expressed in language that we’re not inclined to use today: “If only you would slay the wicked, O God I hate those who hate you, O Lord I count them my enemies”. But the principle here is that if we love God we should love the things that he loves and hate the things that he hates. Throughout the OT we read of God’s hatred of injustice. And the prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, spoke out fiercely and angrily against oppression. In the OT law, God’s people were told repeatedly to care for the weaker/more vulnerable members of the community - and amongst those are people with learning disabilities, who are more likely to experience bullying, unemployment, imprisonment and homelessness than other members of our society. When we worship a great God we are called to be identified with his agenda, of fierce opposition to injustice and oppression. To hate evil means to work for justice, To live in partnership with God means to work with him in order to bring about his kingdom “on earth, as it is in heaven”.

We’ve still got a long way to go to get things right in this country but I was reminded recently of how far we’ve come from the days when disabled people were shut away and rarely seen in public. We were in Cambridge a couple of weeks ago to look after our grandchildren. One of the many bicycles and tricycles equipped with child carriages drew up alongside me and there was a young Muslim woman we’d got to know while we were in Cambridge on a

weekly basis. Her son Qes, who has Downs Syndrome, was with her, and I asked how he was getting on; she said that he's reaching all his milestones, just rather later than others, he's happy at school and she's now able to go back to university for further study. It reminded me that she'd told me previously how delighted she was with the wonderful support she received in this country. "Where I come from", she said, "He would have to be hidden away and I wouldn't get any help at all. I sometimes feel like writing to the Queen to say 'thank you!'"

Now our services are far from what they should be and it's right to work for improvements but they are based on the principles of justice that stem from our Judeo/Christian heritage (which sadly was ignored for vast tracts of our history). Part of the prophetic role of the church is to model God's justice and compassion to the wider society - but sometimes we can find ourselves lagging behind it. The use of our church premises for day services for adults with learning difficulties is unfortunately coming to an end, at least for the time being, but openness to the needs of the local community remains part of our commitment to look outwards in care and concern.

The reading from I Cor 12 reminded us that within our church community there is a wide range of gifts. The body of Christ, the church, includes every sort of person whatever our abilities or disabilities. We all have much to give and much to receive. We know, for example, that there are a number of people in our church who have the gift of working with and communicating with people who have special support needs – and that's a great blessing. What we sometimes forget is that we can also receive from those whose abilities are different. The minister in the DVD clip we watched asked what we can learn from those we think we have to teach. Years ago at a Christian conference a young man with Downs Syndrome shared his love for Jesus with the congregation with confidence and dignity as well as joy. I remember it now. Who was the main speaker? What was the sermon about? I've no idea! But I remember the young man's talk. But people can only use their abilities if they feel valued. In the videos we've seen this morning we've recognised particular gifts of communication (and not necessarily just in the best readers). They were valued enough to be given the opportunity to express themselves. I was impressed by the way that the facilitator made the readings manageable and enjoyable and also that he took part so that no-one felt patronised. And we were all blessed through their contribution. You may have noticed a gentleman in a wheelchair in the videos. He's called David and he's got very little speech. I thought it was great that he was included in the videos and he also communicated through the warmth of his smile.

Each local church needs to consider how it makes people feel included – and valued for the abilities they have. We can't pretend that that's an easy task but many things that are worthwhile are far from easy. I believe that we're on track to be welcoming. And that's vital – because if the congregation reacts negatively to the slightest word or noise from people who can't always control the way they communicate, then parents will feel it's not worth the bother of coming to church with their adult children. If everything we do involves reading, then some people will decide church is not for them. One minister, after exploring the place of people with a learning disability in the life of the church, decided this: "Every time I prepare Sunday morning worship there will be some aspect of the service that a person with a learning disability can access easily and so feel part of the worshipping community". That's certainly a challenge for all of us who lead services, as is enabling people to participate according to their gifts if they want to do so.

Of course, church services are not talent shows and often our most effective contributions to the body of Christ are in our relationships with each other. We can wrongly assume that it's only those with a full range of abilities who can care for others. When my brother Iain was in hospital his house-mates (most of whom were in the video) visited him, sent him gifts and prayed for him. Can you and I do better than that? The love and happiness that people share with others is not restricted to the more able. Iain prays regularly for all the family members and for all the churches that he's been part of, and asks often about the people he remembers (everyone!). Many of you will be able to quote similar examples from friends and family members. Our churches are enriched by a full range of gifts.

Psalm 139 ends with the familiar prayer, 'Search me, O God, and know my thoughts see if there is any offensive way (literally, way of grief) in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. People with learning difficulties are often more open and transparent than the rest of us. They don't usually hide their feelings (particularly their frustrations!). We too need to live transparently with God if he is to use us, so that we are continually open to his cleansing, his wisdom and his guidance.

We have a great creator God. We are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' and, as followers of Jesus, we're given the task of working to bring about his kingdom. As part of that commitment, let's make sure we are always welcoming to people with learning disabilities and involved in helping them to lead full lives within our church and our society. Amen.

Hazel Rendle, September 2015