**30th March 2014**

**Psalm 139**

It is Mothering Sunday – a day to think about your mother. A day when if you are a mother, to reflect on the many emotions and experiences that mothers go through: motherhood can be a joyful, painful, exciting, mind-numbing business and above all, a long haul affair. .

I read a piece by Diane Parson recalling the first day at school for her two children. It is in her husband Rob Parson’s book ‘The Sixty Minute Mother. Rob and Diane Parsons head up Care for the Family a Christian based charity supporting marriage and parents.

ARTICLE:

*I often have to drive past the infant’s school that my children attended. My daughter Katie is now twenty two, my son Lloyd, nineteen, and yet I only have to glance at the school gates at the end of the playground for a million memories to come flooding back. Suddenly it’s a crisp September morning and it is my daughter’s first day at school. We walk from our home together, her hand tightly gripping mine. The excitement and bravado of this step into the world of the ‘big children’ seem to desert her the moment we close the front door, and now she looks white and worried and I catch her nibbling her bottom lip - a sure sign that tears are close at hand.*

*I edge her down the road towards the school and talk of anything except this special day. She mumbles replies but I catch her watching the other children to whom this is old hat; the kids who jostle us are seven year old veterans. She begins to slow her step and I begin to fear the worst when suddenly an angel appears, or so it seems to me. Actually it is her best friend for whom this is also the first day. Suddenly Katie leaves my side and runs towards Rhianna. I am standing watching as these two little girls walk solemnly up the school drive together, holding hands and each clutching a ‘my little pony’ lunch box. I feel my eyes fill up and then Katie turns and shouts, ‘see you later Mum!’*

*Against all the predictions my shy, careful child has done it. She has begun.*

*And then my mind fast forwards three years. It is Lloyd’s first. The parenting gurus tell us that if your first child is shy, careful and compliant you’re second will be different. Lloyd was desperate not to disappoint those experts. In fact, he has dedicated most of his young life to proving them correct in every detail knew that his first day of school would be quite different – I just didn’t have any idea how different.*

*In an event never to be repeated he was up and dressed before me and hammering on my bedroom door yelling, ‘Come on, I want to get there early!’ As I had with Katie, I took his hand as we walked down the road together, but whereas Katie had found this comforting, Lloyd looked as though somebody had tethered him to a walking embarrassment. He dragged me onwards the place of learning, firing off threatening glances at children twice his size, and, with a burst of impatience, finally broke loose and ran ahead. I turned a corner and saw he was almost at the gate. And then it happened. He took one look into the playground, grimaced at a teacher, and then slowly walked back to me and said, ‘I’m not going.’*

*I immediately clicked into my ‘no pain – no gain’, ‘you’ll be sorry when you’re thirty’ and ‘superman went to school’ routine. He looked up with that little jaw set in the now familiar look of defiance and repeated, ‘I’m not going’. And so the battle began. There were moments over the following ten minutes when it seemed possible that with the aid of other mothers I would loosen his grip on the lamp post. But he held firm. The prospect of Lloyd beginning his formal education linked to twenty feet of vertical concrete with a light on top was rushing through my brain when the deputy head appeared.*

*I have never managed to work out whether her concern was for me, Lloyd or the property of the county council, but she ordered me to leave. I will never forget Lloyd’s fac. He was torn between running after me – which meant giving up his hold on the lamp post – or remaining within the influence of a woman who looked decidedly less sympathetic to the plight of small boys than his mother. He hesitated and I went – not willingly, but propelled along by Sheila Harrison who had done all this four times already. As she whisked me away she said, ‘He’ll be better off without you’. I have since wondered whether she meant just at that moment or in life generally.*

*But on that morning at least, she was right and I had finally ushered my two children into the ‘real’ world. How was I to know that motherhood involves a million school gate experiences at every age and that the process was only just starting? Why didn’t somebody tell me? I’ll tell you the reason – because if they had, you’d have never got me off that lamp post!*

It’s a good little book and very honest about being a mother. Rob Parsons suggest that if you have young children you should go up to your child’s bedroom and take the dog eared copy of ‘Children’s best loved stories’ off the bookshelf. Now turn to the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’, put the coffee on and red. When you get to the part where the small boy yells ‘the King is naked!’ imbibe the honesty, let it seep into your very soul, set your coffee down and run into the streets yelling, ‘being a mother is hard!’ ‘Sometimes I don’t like my kids!’ ‘Sometimes I wish I hadn’t had kids’. And as you shout, turn around, for you will see behind you thousands o mothers joining in the procession and all of them with a look of utter joy on their faces, not for the fact that they have found solutions, but for the sheer wonder that at long last the truth is out.

Let’s be honest, for all sorts of reasons it is hard being a mother. We acknowledge that today on mothering Sunday. Let’s be honest, sometimes we struggle with our mothers – perhaps we felt that they didn’t like us or gave us enough love or maybe they gave us too much love – if that’s possible?

Mothering Sunday is for the church a much broader idea than appreciating the person who brought us into the world and released us into the real world. It is more about who has nurtured and cared for us throughout our years, particularly mothers, but not necessarily so – it could be people who have acted in a mothering capacity, those who created a home for you.. In its origin it was about the Mother Church – that nurtured us in faith and helped us know the love of God the one who ultimately gave us life and released us into the real world.

Our psalm today speaks about God holding our hand, having his hand upon us and also having’ intimate knowledge of us, from even before birth, when we were lying in our mother’s womb. It speaks about God’s knowledge of us throughout life – whatever our path. As we are released into the real world God is there whether we acknowledge God or not. God is there in the darkness or the light. Where can we escape from God?

That thought can be a bit frightening or it can be comforting, depending on our perspective.

I want you to think for a moment about what would it be like for somebody to know everything about you. Do you think you’d like that? It’s not unusual to hear someone complain, "Nobody really knows me, and nobody understands me." And it’s true that there is generally shallowness to our relationships. When someone asks how we’re doing, the socially acceptable answer is, "fine". Inside we may be thinking, "the kids are really driving me crazy, I’m about to shoot my husband, I can’t take any more", but you say, "I’m doing fine." And you smile.

We think we’d like to have someone who understands us fully. But maybe we’re not sure about that? Can you imagine having someone who really does know you? Such a person would have access to every thought, every action, and every mistake in your life. Imagine not having anything secrets!

It would be frightening to have someone know everything about us, and yet when you come to Psalm 139, that’s exactly the picture you get of God.

Several years ago, Bette Midler came out with a beautiful song called "From a Distance". In part of that song, she sings "God is watching us, God is watching us, and God is watching us from a distance." I’ve always had mixed feelings about that song because I couldn’t tell whether the emphasis was on the fact that God is watching us or the fact that God isn’t anywhere nearby. But it certainly is true that God is watching us.

There was a joke about a church school canteen. In the dining hall there was a table which at one end had a bowl of fruit and a notice that said ‘boys and girls take only one item of fruit. God is watching you! At the other end of the table was a plate of chocolate biscuits and some wit had written on the notice by the plate: take as many chocolate biscuits as you like – God is watching the fruit.

The Psalmists writes how God has searched me. The Hebrew term here originally meant "to explore" and sometimes conveyed the idea of digging into something. It’s an intent looking.
Have any of you lost anything recently -- keys, wallet, remote control for the TV, glasses? Your glasses are the worst things to lose because you need them to find them. Whenever you misplace something, you go all over, looking desperately, turning things upside down. Looking here, looking there, all over, searching.

The Psalmist writes that God knows me and understands my thoughts. He comprehends my comings and goings. He is familiar with my ways

It comes out just a little bit stronger maybe in the Hebrew. “I can’t get away with anything” is my loose translation. God knows my habits, my strengths, my weaknesses. He knows all my business.

He knows my words before they’re on my tongue

Have you ever been so close to somebody that they know what you’re going to say before you even say it? I think that’s one of the most irritating things about marriage. You can never have an original statement because you start a sentence and pause and your spouse finishes it for you. It’s that way even more so with God.

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it."

The psalmist asks, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Up down, east west? Trying all the different directions isn’t going to do much for us. Like a child hiding under the bed sheets! “Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me."

Well, let’s just wait out the daytime and let the darkness protect us. That won’t help either, because God can see in the dark. There are going to be no secrets, there’s going to be no hope that God didn’t pay much attention to what your life was all about. He knows. Trust me, he knows.
Is all this knowledge threatening or comforting? It does depend on your view of God. What is god like to you?

We have had some deep and meaningful conversations on the Christianity Explored Course on Wednesday nights at the Courtyard café opposite the church. The other week we were discussing our view of what God is like. Is God indifferent to us – couldn’t care less – set up the rules and laws of the universe and lets us get on with it. Is god punitive – set up the laws and rules and is watching us and ready to punish us when we make a mistake or don’t keep them. Life is therefore about measuring up to God’s standards in order to avoid God’s punishment. Life and faith can therefore be based on fear – fear of being found out, caught short, not making the grade.

The third option is that God is gracious, loving and compassionate. God knows we make a mess but carries on loving us all the same. It leads to very different kind of life and faith: which is not about measuring up for salvation – but about deepening that relationship with God who is the centre of all life, finding that honesty to know yourself and accept yourself and most importantly know that God loves us you and accepts you as you are and is alongside you as you journey forward. Life is no longer fear based. But more trust based – whatever happens darkness or light, wherever you go –no need to worry God is there. – You are held and loved.

Is this gracious God a bit of a pushover though? Does it mean there is no justice, no right or wrong? Just yesterday we had the issue of same sex marriages happening for the first time in this country. What does God think about it – is the question that people of faith are thinking?

 Are there rules and laws for the order of creation. Or are those guidelines for our wellbeing but God is primarily love and celebrates love wherever it is found and wants to encourage love to be faithful and committed. Do you put the emphasis on rules and regulations or on experience and love, or is there a middle ground, somewhere in between. Deep questions about the nature of God and therefore ultimate reality. We have had good conversation in the café.

In verses 23-24, the psalmist says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The psalmist says to God, "Search me even more."

Isn’t that like being audited by the Inland Revenue (the tax year coming to an end) and you say to them, "Oh by the way, why don’t you go ahead and pull out my returns for the past seven years and take a look at them while you’re at it. Go ahead and search a little more thoroughly."?

You would never invite anybody to do that if you didn’t know they were going to come at you with a little bit of care and love.

"Search me and know my heart" could only be spoken by someone who feels completely loved and accepted. These words could only be spoken to someone who unconditionally loves the person they are watching. They see every square inch of your life -- and still they love you.

So, God is an all-seeing eye, but Psalm 139 describes not the eye of a critic that is searching for an opportunity to put you down. Rather it is the eye of a loving parent or a true friend.

Honesty is always the best policy so my mother always said. Jesus said ‘the truth will set you free’. Search me and know my heart. Honesty about ourselves, when we make a mess, when we find things hard, whether hat’s being a mum and raising children, or whether we are not facing up to a problem or a challenge – honesty will always free us from the burden of being something we are not. At the deep centre of our lives God meets us in all honesty. There is no point in trying to hide. But that loving presence can heal, that acceptance can transform.

Like your mother, God has been there from the start, holding your hand. Now you are released into the real world do you keep in touch? Do you keep in touch with the one who gives your life and who knows your life?

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/an-all-seeing-eye-alan-smith-sermon-on-gods-omniscience-49361.asp?Page=1>

**Prayer idea**

Psalm 139 prompts a whole range of responses, as the children will discover. If they come into church at the end of the service, encourage the children to lead the congregation in prayer using what they have discovered in their response to God.

If not, use the psalm in the following confession:

‘You notice everything I do and everywhere I go! ...Where can I go to escape from your Spirit? ... Nothing about me is hidden from you.

Father God, this week you have seen all that we have done. (*Pause to allow people to refl ect on what they have said to*

*others and done this last week, both good and not so good.*)

Father God, this week you have seen everywhere we have gone. (*Pause to allow people to refl ect on where they have been*

*this week.*)

Nothing is hidden from you and this need not alarm us because you are a good and loving God. But we ask for your forgiveness now for the things we have said and done, and what we have not said and done, which have displeased you.

(*Pause to allow people to refl ect on where they need to receive God’s forgiveness.*)

Please forgive us and go on loving us, forever! Amen.