

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
1 Corinthians 13:8-13

When we gather like this in a place like this, it is to tell not one story but two. The one is our story with each other, of which we have just heard a little today (and it is always *too little*); the other is God's story with us, to which we now turn.

Yet, in this turn, we don't leave the first story behind; we tell our own story and God's story because they are intertwined. This relationship can be treated in all manner of ways, but today, taking the lead from the psalmist and St Paul, we'll consider the relation of these stories through the question of what it is to *know*.

The quest for knowledge drives us, and some of you are here today because Audrey's own quest for understanding drew you to each other. Among all the things that might be known, we ourselves are what we most deeply desire to know in this world. Of all the objects of knowledge we might consider, we ourselves are the most interesting, the most extraordinary. For, as the psalmist whispers, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we delight to know more of this.

The knowledge our searching will reveal by itself is of a certain, limited type. It is oriented toward ourselves-in-the-world as 'problem': the What and the How and Why of what we do, or need, or suffer.

Yet the knowing we encountered today in the psalm and St Paul is of a different order.

Psalm 139 is one of the most intimate passages of the Scriptures, in which the poet marvels at his very self and at God's knowledge of that self.

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

¹³ ...For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Alongside the poet, we heard from St Paul, who is not often accused of poetry. Yet if not aesthetically, he poetises technically – not so much in his selection of words but in his sense for the order in which things should be said, the way in which things should be made relative to each other, the grammar of our *being*:

I *know*, but only in part; yet I *shall* know even as I am now fully *known*.

These two write not of knowledge as answer to question; they intimate knowledge of *mystery*. This mystery is not a solvable problem but that which, *of its very nature*, is *impenetrable*. It is unmistakably there, it can be seen, it *matters*, but it resists comprehension.

'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it...'

'...For now we see through a glass, darkly' (as we said it in the old tongue).

The particular mystery Paul and the poet contemplate is their own irreducible being, known to them in part, and yet *fully known* by another.

We are driven to know ourselves and to understand, and yet we will never reach that goal. This is not because it is too far – not because there is *too much* to know about ourselves – but because *our* comprehending in this way is not the point of it all.

The point is to know that we are known, to seek to understand out of that knowledge which is *God's knowledge* of us. The mystery at the heart of our being is God's knowledge of us, in all our strengths and all our weaknesses. We strive to grasp that God has grasped us in all our breadth and length and depth and height.

To know ourselves as God knows us would be to change what we think knowing is all about. Paul was writing against a certain interpretation of knowledge and experience. His criticism of knowledge in that community was that it didn't carry the mystery of who they were, and the mystery of *whose* they were – the mystery of whose *we* are. And so the community was breaking apart all over the place. There was at play a knowledge which puffed up and divided rather than built up and unified.

You are more than this, he insists. And the *only* way you can know it is *to love*. Properly to be the mystery you are, to know yourself in this way, is to love. Love is the knowing which creates and builds.

For love always begins before we do, *outside* of us. Love is, first of all, the love we *receive*.

This is the love which nurses the unknowing infant; it is the love which teaches those who don't yet know but now can understand. It is the love we hear in the 'I do'. It is the love which holds the hand of one whose knowledge now passes in and out of reach, who is ceasing now even to know herself. It is the love which causes us to gather as we have today because we knew someone who no longer knows anything *and yet* is loved.

Whatever we might strive to know, it is finally only resting in the knowledge that we are *known* which will answer that striving.

Prophecies, tongues, knowledge – these things of ours all come to an end, and we will leave them behind. Yet if *love* ever ended, then we would too.

But Paul and the poet testify: Love never ends because it begins not with us but with God. We were known before we knew; we know now only in part; we will be known still, once we cease to know any longer.

We know and love – and strive after these things – because God knows and loves us. We know less than we should and love less than we ought, but God's knowledge and love exceed ours.

This excess is like wisdom to foolishness, strength to weakness, life to death. And so when, for all our best efforts to understand, to love and to live, we find ourselves to be fools, or indifferent, or dead, God abides and exceeds and carries us over to himself.

This is how our stories are intertwined with the story of God. It is given to us to find our way to God, in the knowledge that God has already found his way to us.

To know as one known, to love as one loved: this is the call of God and the gift of God.

Let us, then, open our ears to the call that we might receive the gift.
