

## Psalms 139(138)



### "O where can I go?"



Lord, you search me and you know me,  
you know my resting and my rising,  
you discern my purpose from afar.  
You mark when I walk or lie down,  
all my ways lie open to you.

Before ever a word is on my tongue  
you know it, O Lord, through and through.  
Behind and before you besiege me,  
your hand ever laid upon me.  
Too wonderful for me this knowledge,  
too high, beyond my reach.

O where can I go from your spirit,  
or where can I flee from your face?  
If I climb the heavens, you are there.  
If I lie in the grave, you are there.

If I take the wings of the dawn  
and dwell at the sea's furthest end,  
even there your hand would lead me,  
your right hand would hold me fast.

If I say: "Let the darkness hide me  
and the light around me be night,"  
even darkness is not dark for you  
and the night is as clear as the day.

For it was you who created my being,  
knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I thank you for the wonder of my being,  
for the wonders of all your creation.

Already you knew my soul  
my body held no secret from you  
when I was being fashioned in secret  
and molded in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw all my actions,  
they were all of them written in your book;  
every one of my days was decreed  
before one of them came into being.

To me, how mysterious your thoughts,  
the sum of them not to be numbered!  
If I count them, they are more than the sand;  
to finish, I must be eternal, like you.

O God, that you would slay  
the wicked!  
Men of blood, keep far away  
from me!  
With deceit they rebel against you  
and set your designs at naught.

Do I not hate those who hate you,  
abhor those who rise against you?  
I hate them with a perfect hate  
and they are foes to me.

O search me, God, and know my heart.  
O test me and know my thoughts.  
See that I follow not the wrong path



and lead me in the path of life eternal.

1. The Liturgy of Vespers - on whose Psalms and Canticles we are meditating - offers us in two separate phases the reading of a sapiential hymn of clear beauty and strong emotional impact: Psalm 139[138]. Today, we have before us the first part of the composition (cf. vv. 1-12), that is, the first two strophes which respectively exalt God's omniscience (cf. vv. 1-6) and his omnipresence in space and in time (cf. vv. 7-12).

The purpose of the forceful images and expressions is to celebrate the Creator: "If the greatness of the works created is immense", said Theodoret of Cyr, a Christian writer of the fifth century, "how much greater their Creator must be!" (Discorsi sulla Provvidenza, 4: Collana di Testi Patristici, LXXV, Rome, 1988, p. 115). The Psalmist's meditation sought above all to penetrate the mystery of God, transcendent yet close to us.

2. The substance of the message he offers us is straightforward: God knows everything and is present beside his creature who cannot elude him. However, his presence is neither threatening nor inspectorial; of course, he also looks reprovingly at evil, to which he is not indifferent.

Yet the basic element is that of a saving presence which can embrace the whole being and the whole of history. In practice, this is the spiritual scenario to which St Paul alluded at the Areopagus of Athens, with recourse to a quotation from a Greek poet: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 28).



3. The first part (cf. Ps 139[138]: 1-6), as I said, is the celebration of the divine omniscience: in fact, verbs suggesting knowledge are repeated, such as "scrutinize", "know", "discern", "penetrate", "understand", "be wise".

As is well known, biblical knowledge exceeds pure and simple intellectual learning and understanding; it is a sort of communion between the One who knows and the one known: hence, the Lord is intimately close to us while we are thinking and acting.

On the other hand, the second part of our Psalm (cf. vv. 7-12) is dedicated to the divine omnipresence. The illusory desire of human beings to flee from that presence is vividly described in it. The whole of space is steeped in it: there is first of all the vertical axis "heaven-hell" (cf. v. 8), which gives way to the horizontal dimension which extends from dawn, that is, from the East, and reaches as far as the Mediterranean "sea's furthest end", that is, the West (cf. v. 9). Every sphere of space, even the most secret, contains God's active presence.

The Psalmist continues, also introducing the other reality in which we are immersed: time, symbolically portrayed by night and by light, by darkness and by day (cf. vv. 11-12).

The gaze and the manifestation of the Lord of being and time even penetrates the darkness, in which it is difficult to move about and see. His hand is always ready to grasp ours, to lead us on our earthly journey (cf. v. 10). This is not, therefore, a judgmental closeness that inspires terror, but a closeness of support and liberation. And so we can understand what the ultimate, essential content of this Psalm is: it is a song of trust. God is always with us. Even in the darkest nights of our lives, he does not abandon us. Even in the most difficult moments, he remains present. And even in the last night, in the last loneliness in which no one can accompany us, the night of death, the Lord does not abandon us.

He is with us even in this final solitude of the night of death. And we Christians can therefore be confident: we are never left on our own. God's goodness is always with us.

4. We began with a citation by the Christian writer Theodoret of Cyr. Let us end by entrusting ourselves once again to him and to his Fourth Discourse on Divine Providence, because in the ultimate analysis this is the theme of the Psalm. He reflects on v. 6, in which the person praying exclaims: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach".

Theodoret comments on this passage by examining the interiority of the conscience and personal experience, and says: "Having turned to me and become intimate with me, after removing me from the external din, he wanted to immerse me in contemplation of my nature...."

Reflecting on these things and thinking of the harmony between the mortal and the immortal natures, I am won over by so much wonder and, not succeeding in contemplating this mystery, recognize my defeat; furthermore, while I proclaim the victory of the Creator's knowledge and sing hymns of praise to him, I cry: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach" (Collana di Testi Patristici, LXXV, Rome, 1988, pp. 116, 117).

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### "THE WONDER OF MY BEING"

1. At this General Audience on Wednesday of the Octave of Christmas, the liturgical Feast of the Holy Innocents, let us resume our meditation on Psalm 139[138], proposed in the Liturgy of Vespers in two distinct stages. After contemplating in the first part (cf. vv. 1-12) the omniscient and omnipotent God, the Lord of being and history, this sapiential hymn of intense beauty and deep feeling now focuses on the loftiest, most marvellous reality of the entire universe: man, whose being is described as a "wonder" of God (cf. v. 14).

Indeed, this topic is deeply in tune with the Christmas atmosphere we are living in these days in which we celebrate the great mystery of the Son of God who became man, indeed, became a Child, for our salvation.

After pondering on the gaze and presence of the Creator that sweeps across the whole cosmic horizon, in the second part of the Psalm on which we are meditating today God turns his loving gaze upon the human being,

whose full and complete beginning is reflected upon. He is still an "unformed substance" in his mother's womb: the Hebrew term used has been understood by several biblical experts as referring to an "embryo", described in that term as a small, oval, curled-up reality, but on which God has already turned his benevolent and loving eyes (cf. v. 16).

2. To describe the divine action within the maternal womb, the Psalmist has recourse to classical biblical images, comparing the productive cavity of the mother to the "depths of the earth", that is, the constant vitality of great mother earth (cf. v. 15).

First of all, there is the symbol of the potter and of the sculptor who "fashions" and moulds his artistic creation, his masterpiece, just as it is said about the creation of man in the Book of Genesis: "the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground" (Gn 2: 7).



Then there is a "textile" symbol that evokes the delicacy of the skin, the flesh, the nerves, "threaded" onto the bony skeleton. Job also recalled forcefully these and other images to exalt that masterpiece which the human being is, despite being battered and bruised by suffering: "Your hands have formed me and fashioned me.... Remember that you fashioned me from clay...! Did you not pour me out as milk and thicken me like cheese? With skin and flesh you clothed me, with bones and sinews knit me together" (Jb 10: 8-11).

3. The idea in our Psalm that God already sees the entire future of that embryo, still an "unformed sub-

stance", is extremely powerful. The days which that creature will live and fill with deeds throughout his earthly existence are already written in the Lord's book of life. Thus, once again the transcendent greatness of divine knowledge emerges, embracing not only humanity's past and present but also the span, still hidden, of the future. However, the greatness of this little unborn human creature, formed by God's hands and surrounded by his love, also appears: a biblical tribute to the human being from the first moment of his existence.

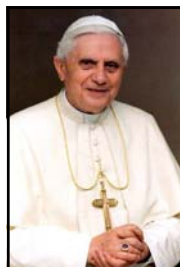
Let us now entrust ourselves to the reflection that St Gregory the Great in his Homilies on Ezekiel has interwoven with the sentence of the Psalm on which we commented earlier: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them [my days]" (v. 16). On those words the Pontiff and Father of the Church composed an original and delicate meditation concerning all those in the Christian Community who falter on their spiritual journey.

And he says that those who are weak in faith and in Christian life are part of the architecture of the Church. "They are nonetheless added... by virtue of good will. It is true, they are imperfect and little, yet as far as they are able to understand, they love God and their neighbour and do not neglect to do all the good that they can. Even if they do not yet attain spiritual gifts so as to open their soul to perfect action and ardent contemplation, yet they do not fall behind in love of God and neighbour, to the extent that they can comprehend it.

"Therefore, it happens that they too contribute to building the Church because, although their position is less important, although they lag behind in teaching, prophecy, the grace of miracles and complete distaste for the world, yet they are based on foundations of awe and love, in which they find their solidity" (2, 3, 12-13, Opere di Gregorio Magno, III/2, Rome, 1993, pp. 79, 81).

St Gregory's message, therefore, becomes a great consolation to all of us who often struggle wearily along on the path of spiritual and ecclesial life. The Lord knows us and surrounds us all with his love.

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Pope Benedict XVI  
14 December 2005  
28 December 2005

