

Sermon: Sunday 18 January 2009
Reflections on Psalm 139

In the children's book 'The Velveteen Rabbit' by Margery William's, the Velveteen Rabbit and the old skin horse are talking in the nursery:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn't how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY love you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

“I suppose you are Real?” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

“The Boy's Uncle made me Real,” he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic call Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.

(The Velveteen Rabbit, Margery William's, pp 4,5)

One of the joys of being in a close relationship is knowing the other person well and being *known* by her or him. In a good relationship, there is no need to pretend - you become. You become real.

The other person is aware of faults; knows when you dislike talking first thing in the

morning or have trouble being on time for appointments. The other person knows these things and, because of the strength of the relationship, loves in spite of them (Seasons of the Spirit, Jan 19 p 88)

Psalms 139 is a well known treasure. It is a poetic meditation on God's intimate presence with humankind. It images a God who knows us through and through - knows our actions, our thoughts, our questions (Seasons of the Spirit)

It portrays an intimate relationship indeed.

The psalm is full of images of an active relationship, of a God who searches, who forms and makes, who is deeply involved in human lives. It wonders at the mystery of creation.

Sometimes people hear the verses about God's 'wonderful' and complete knowledge as threatening. Does this image of a God who 'hems us in' speak of protection or prohibition? Does God really know everything we are going to say and do before it happens?

Sometimes it is scary to think that I am known, through and through. I remember once, on retreat at Stroud, I lay on the stone floor of the chapel feeling totally unworthy before the hugeness, the goodness of God. And I heard God say "get up, I love you as you are, get up". So I did, eventually; I had to — 'get up and share my love,' God said, so I try to, even though I don't do it very well sometimes.

The psalm raises more questions. Are our days actually numbered? If God knows all things in advance, is there any free will for human beings?

It's all a mystery, the psalmist says, "God's thoughts are too weighty for us to grasp". What we do know is that God is good and wants what is best for us.

We can become ourselves in intimate relationship with this God, but it takes trust and time.

I know that in a relationship with a certain man who I thought I loved, I turned myself inside out, trying to be what I thought he wanted. And in the process lost both myself, and my partner. It would have been better if I'd had the confidence to relax and be myself — to not try so hard.

My stepdaughters also give me that injunction 'don't try so hard'. Perhaps a test of relationship with God and others is 'can I be myself, warts and all'? Can I allow the other to be him/her self?

Are we becoming real? (Maybe this says something about our image of God too?)

There's an old African tale retold by Laura Simms that has some wisdom here. (Storytelling, Imagination and Faith, William J Bausch, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT 1984, p.206)

There was once a man who owned black and white cattle. They were no ordinary cattle and he tended them as if they were his children. He took them each day to graze in green pastures and they gave white frothy milk. But for three mornings, when the man went to milk his cows, their udders were empty and withered and they gave no milk. So he decided to stay up at night and watch them. And he did.

In the middle of the night he saw a rope come down from the sky. Women descended from the sky with calabashes (large gourds). They were sky people. They placed their calabashes on the earth beneath his cows and milked them until the gourds were overflowing with the white frothy milk. Then they began to ascend the rope.

He saw one woman more beautiful than the others and he wanted her for his wife. So he caught her. The other women ran away. She struggled, until he cried out to her, "I want to marry you." She stopped struggling and said, "Mortal, I will marry you on one condition: I have a finely woven basket. Promise not to open it until I give you my permission. If you open it too soon, harm will befall us." He promised. She married him.

She placed the basket by the door of their house. She was a good wife. She even tended his black and white cattle. But as time passed, the man grew curious. "What does she keep in the basket?" One day he thought, "What harm will it be if I look? And after all, isn't she my wife? Isn't it then my basket too? So when she was tending his cattle, he opened the basket.

The man began to laugh, for he saw nothing in her basket. So he closed it, putting the lid carefully onto the bottom. Just then the wife returned home. "What did you do today?" she asked. Laughing, the man answered, "I looked into your basket." "What did you see?" she asked sadly. "I saw nothing. It was empty." he said laughing.

The woman picked up the basket and put it on her knees. "you saw nothing. But the basket was full. I kept all the beautiful things of the sky in the basket for you and me. If you had waited, I would have taught you to see." She left. The woman who came from the sky went back to the sky.

It is the same today. Mankind still thinks the things of the spirit are empty.

The story from 1 Samuel tells of a young child, who with the openness of childhood hears the call of God, but as yet cannot discern it.

He is known and loved. It takes spiritual direction, the wisdom of an elder to help in his discernment — only then is he able to hear, then deliver the painful message to Eli, because God's presence is with him. A long term deep relationship is forming.

In John 1:43-51, Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel. Jesus has a deep sense of Nathaniel, even before he meets him.

Paul in Corinthians reminds his listeners to respect each other as people created by God, known and loved.

One of our young people was concerned about going on the Year 9/10 Camp Pelican this year. He said "I liked the Year 7/8 Camp Pelican because people are themselves." "Year 9/10", he said "have to be adolescents; they try to be what they're not. They can't just muck around, they pretend to be so sophisticated".

True relationship is being known for who we truly are; gradually letting the masks down; letting go of pretenses; relaxing, resting, being.

Being known can be disturbing and challenging even. But it is very freeing. It is a gift.

The rabbit doesn't have to do anything to become real. He is much loved by the boy.

We don't have to do anything to become real to God. We are real, and much loved.