**Meditation on Psalm 139**

Pope Benedict XVI (abbreviated)

The first part of Psalm 139: 1-12 exalts God’s omniscience (vv. 1-6) and his omnipresence in space and in time (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!” The Psalmist’s meditation sought to penetrate the mystery of God, transcendent yet close to us.

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.

The first part ([vv. 1-6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%20139.1-6)), is the celebration of the divine omniscience:  in fact, verbs suggesting knowledge are repeated, such as “scrutinize”, “know”, “discern”, “penetrate”, “understand”, “be wise”.

Biblical knowledge exceeds 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 (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” (v. 8), which gives way to the horizontal dimension that extends from dawn, that is, from the East, and reaches as far as the Mediterranean “sea’s furthest end”, that is, the West (v. 9). Every sphere of space, even the most secret, contains God’s active presence.

The Psalmist continues, introducing the other reality in which we are immersed: time, symbolically portrayed by night and by light, by darkness and by day (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 (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.

Theodoret of Cyr 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.”

Psalm 139: 13-24

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 moulded 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 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.

After contemplating in the first part of [Psalm 139:1-12](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%20139.1-12), the omniscient and omnipotent God, the Lord of being and history, this 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 (v. 14).

So, after pondering on the gaze and presence of the Creator that sweeps across the whole cosmic horizon, in the second part of the Psalm, he 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 (v. 16).

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 (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” ([Gen 2:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gn%202.7)).

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.”…. ([Job 10:8-11](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Job%2010.8-11)).

The idea in our Psalm that God already sees the entire future of that embryo, still an “unformed substance”, 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.