"WHITHER SHALL I GO FROM THY SPIRIT; OR WHITHER SHALL I FLEE FROM THY PRESENCE?" PSALM 139:7-8

"THE INESCAPABLE PRESENCE"

PSALM SPEAKS OF OMNIPRESENCE OR EVERYWHERENESS OF GOD. PSALM ASCRIBED TO DAVID BUT SOME DOUBT AS TO WHETHER HE WROTE IT. IN DAVID'S DAY GOD STILL THOUGHT OF AS A TERRITORIAL GOD. A GREAT GOD OF COURSE; BUT WITH JURISDICTION ONLY OVER A CERTAIN TERRITORY. PASSING OVER THE BOUNDARY OF THAT TERRITORY, ONE ENTERED TERRITORY OF ANOTHER GOD.

SOMETIMES MEN HAD INTIMATIONS OF A LARGER GOD NOT LIMITED BY PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES. JACOB FOR EXAMPLE. THAT'S THE MEANING OF HIS DREAM AT BETHEL. RUNNING FROM HOME TO AVOID ANGER OF ESAU. LONELY. FIRST TIME AWAY FROM HOME. NIGHT FALLS. LONELY PLACE. HOMESICK. NOT ONLY LEFT HOME BEHIND BUT ALSO HIS GOD. GOD OF THE TRIBE. HE DREAMS OF A LADDER. WHAT DID IT ALL MEAN? MEANING IS FOUND IN HIS WORDS NEXT MORNING - "THE HOUSE OF GOD. HE IS IN THIS PLACE. I KNEW IT NOT". MAKES A VOW.

AND IN THE STORY OF DAVID WE LISTEN AS HE COMPLAINS TO SAUL THE KING. DRIVEN INTO EXILE BY SAUL. COMPLAINS THAT SAUL HAS DRIVEN HIM INTO A LAND WHERE GOD'S JURISDICTION DOES NOT EXTEND. HE PLEADS WITH KING TO ALLOW HIM TO RETURN TO ISRAEL.

AND IF NECESSARY, THERE IS STORY OF NAAMAN THE SYRIAN LEPER. HAD BEEN HEALED THROUGH POWER OF JEHOVAH AS HE HAD WASHED IN SACRED RIVER - JORDAN. WANTS TO WORSHIP GOD OF ISRAEL. BUT HOW CAN HE DO THIS AFTER HE LEAVES TERRITORY OF JEHOVAH?

THEN HAS AN IDEA - HE WILL SECURE THE PRESENCE OF JEHOVAH BY TAKING SOME ISRAELITISH SOIL WITH HIM TO SYRIA - "LET THERE BE GIVEN TO THY SERVANT, I PRAY THEE, TWO MULES' BURDEN OF EARTH; FOR THY SERVANT WILL HENCEFORTH OFFER NEITHER BURNT-OFFERING NOR SACRIFICE UNTO OTHER GODS BUT UNTO LORD".

BUT THAT KIND OF CONCEPT OF GOD BELONGED TO AN EARLIER DAY THAN OUR TEXT. LOOK ON GOD AS MORE THAN A LITTLE TRIBAL DEITY ATTACHED TO A FEW MILES OF ISRAELITISH TERRITORY. IT IS A FAR CRY FROM BELIEF OF DAVID - WHO FEARED TO LIVE IN PHILISTIA BECAUSE GOD COULD NOT REACH TWENTY MILES FROM THE BORDER OF ISRAEL, TO WORDS OF OUR TEXT TO-DAY. WHOEVER WROTE THE PSALM BELIEVED IN A GOD WHO WAS EVERYWHERE - AN INESCAPABLE GOD, AN INEVITABLE GOD
GOD IN HUMANITY

GOD IS EVERYWHERE - INESCAPABLE IN THE UNIVERSE. HE IS UNIVERSAL AND HIS POWER IS EXERCISED OVER EVERY ATOM, STAR, SEA AND SOUL. GOD IS NO ABSENTEE MONARCH SEPARATED FROM HIS KINGDOM; HE IS EXPRESSED AND PRESENT IN ALL OF IT - IN EVERY BIT OF IT. "HE SLEEPS IN THE STONE, DREAMS IN THE FLOWER AND COMES TO CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAN". GOD IS IN THE BLADE OF GRASS AND IN THE BLOCK OF STONE. "SPLIT THE WOOD AND THERE YOU FIND ME; REND THE ROCK AND I AM THERE.

GOD IS IN HIS UNIVERSE. AND CONSPICUOUSLY GOD IS IN HUMANITY. MEN CAN NEVER GET AWAY FROM GOD BECAUSE IN SOME MYSTERIOUS FASHION MAN CARRIES GOD WITHIN HIM. ISN'T THAT THE MEANING OF THE INCARNATION? THE PROFOUND MASTER-TRUTH OF THE UNIVERSE - GOD IN HUMAN FLESH. YES, IF WE ASCEND INTO BEAUTY, STRENGTH AND NOBILITY OF HUMAN LIFE, WE FIND GOD. WHEREEVER LIFE FINDS ITS GREATEST AND NOBLEST MANIFESTATION, WE SEE GOD. THAT IS MEANING OF JESUS.

GOD MUST BE AT LEAST AS BEAUTIFUL AND FINE AS HE.

THERE IS ANOTHER ARRESTING THOUGHT HERE. IF WE DESCEND INTO DEPTHS OF HUMAN NATURE AND DEPRAVITY, THERE GOD IS ALSO. NOT ONLY IN THE BEST OF US BUT IN THE WORST. THAT IS THE ETERNAL GOSPEL - THE GOOD NEWS, THAT IN THE HEART OF EVERYMAN, NO MATTER HOW SEEMINGLY SPIRITUALLY DEAD, IS DIVINITY.

MAN IS WORTH SAVING BECAUSE THERE IS SOMETHING OF GOD WITHIN HIM.

JESUS BELIEVED IT THEREFORE HE DESPAIRED OF NO MAN. HE COULD SEE THE JEWEL IN THE MIRE; IN MARY MAGDALENE HE SAW SOMETHING WORTH REDEEMING. HE SAW GOODNESS IN ZACCHAEUS; REDEEMING QUALITIES IN NOTORIOUS SINNERS; IN THE WORST HE SAW HIDDEN SPLENDOR. IN THE WEAKNESS AND SORDIDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE JESUS SOUGHT FOR AND FOUND SOMETHING OF GOD.

MEN CANNOT ESCAPE GOD. THEY CANNOT CAST HIM OFF - HE IS A PART OF THEM. WHEN WE TALK OF THE IMMANENCE OF GOD - THAT'S WHAT WE MEAN. GOD IS IN HUMAN LIFE; IN THE BEST OF US AND IN WORST OF US. AND WE CANNOT ESCAPE THE GOD THAT IS WITHIN US.

GOD IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE

GOD IS NOT ONLY IN HUMAN LIFE BUT ALSO IN ALL OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. EASY TO FEEL THAT GOD IS IN OUR EXPERIENCES OF JOY AND STRENGTH, PEACE AND CONQUEST. BUT IT IS A HARDER
MATTER TO FEEL AND BELIEVE THAT GOD IS WITH US IN OUR EXPERIENCES OF DEFEAT, WEAKNESS AND TURMOIL. IN OUR EXALTED MOODS WE CAN BELIEVE GOD IS THERE; IN OUR DARKEST MOODS WE WONDER WHERE GOD IS. LIKE JOD WE CRY OUT "O THAT I KNEW WHERE I MIGHT FIND HIM".

TAKE THE MATTER OF PAIN. HOW DEVASTATING IT CAN BE - HOW DISINTEGRATING. WHERE IS GOD IN PAIN AND SUFFERING? IN THAT SHEOL IS GOD PRESENT? ALL I KNOW IS THIS, THAT IN THE LOWER ORDERS OF SCALE OF CREATION, THERE IS LESS POSSIBILITY OF PAIN THAN IN THE HIGHER. A STONE HAS NO FEELING - PROVERBIAL, "AS MUCH FEELING AS A STONE". NEITHER DO PLANTS CONSCIOUSLY SUFFER. QUESTIONABLE IF WORM FEELS PAIN. THE MORE HIGHLY DEVELOPED, THE MORE SENSITIVE CREATION BECOMES, AND THE GREATER IS THE POSSIBILITY OF PAIN. WITH THE GROWTH OF WHAT WE CALL THE SOUL, WE BECOME MORE VULNERABLE TO PAIN. WE SORROW FOR THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE; WE ARE ANXIOUS ABOUT LOVED FAR AWAY; WE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THIS WAR. THE MORE OF GOD THERE IS IN US, THE GREATER OUR CAPACITY FOR LOVE AND AFFECTION, AND THE GREATER OUR CAPACITY FOR PAIN. YES, GOD IS PRESENT IN OUR SUFFERING. IN A DEEP SENSE IT IS GOD SUFFERING WITHIN US. BY THE WAY, THINK OF GOD'S CAPACITY FOR SUFFERING.


GOD IN SHEOL SAYS THE PSALMIST, "EVEN IN SHEOL ONE CANNOT ESCAPE FROM GOD. IF I
WHO WROTE THE POWERFUL LINES KNOWN AS "THE HOUND OF HEAVEN". HE DESCRIBES GOD AS THE POWERFUL LOVER OF SOULS - A LOVER WHO WILL NOT LET ANY MAN GO. THOMPSON SETS FORTH WITH PASSION, THE EXPERIENCE OF A HUMAN SOUL IN ITS FUTILE EFFORTS TO EVADE THE TREMENDOUS LOVER. LISTEN:

"I FLED HIM DOWN THE NIGHTS AND DOWN THE DAYS;
I FLED HIM DOWN THE ARCHES OF THE YEARS;
I FLED HIM, DOWN THE LABRINTHINE WAYS
OF MY OWN MIND; AND IN THE MIST OF TEARS
I HID FROM HIM, AND UNDER RUNNING LAUGHTER.

UP VISTAED HOPES I SPED;
AND SHOT, PRECIPITATED,
ADOWN TITANIC GLOOMS OF CHASMED FEARS
FROM THOSE STRONG FEET THAT FOLLOWED,
FOLLOWED AFTER.

BUT WITH UNHURRYING CHASE,
AND UNPERTURBED PACE,
DELIBERATE SPEED, MAJESTIC INSTANCY,
THEY BEAT - AND A VOICE BEAT
MORE INSTANT THAN THE FEET -
'ALL THINGS BETRAY THEE WHO BETRAYEST ME'"

THERE IS NO ESCAPING THE TREMENDOUS LOVER OF OUR SOULS. ON EVERY ROAD HE IS THERE. WHEREVER A PERSON CRIES OUT IN PAIN HE IS THERE. WHEREVER OUR LOVED ONES ARE, HE IS THERE. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, GOD IS THERE. LOST TO OURSELVES, WE ARE NEVER LOST TO HIM.
MAKE MY BED IN SHEOL, BEHOLD THOU ART THERE". IN SHEOL HE IS THERE; EVEN THERE IS A LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET US GO. THEOLOGIANS AND OTHERS HAVE TOLD US OF A HELL THAT IS A PLACE OF ENDLESS TORTURE AND HOPELESSNESS FOR THE LOST - A PLACE OF ETERNAL DAMNATION. I WON'T BELIEVE THAT KIND OF A HELL - IT VIOLATES MY IDEA OF A FATHERLY GOD. WHAT FATHER HERE THIS MORNING COULD CONSIGN HIS CHILD TO THAT KIND OF EVERLASTING EXISTENCE AND TORTURE?

YET I DO BELIEVE IN A KIND OF HELL. BUT IT IS A HELL WITH GOD IN IT. IT IS A HELL THE SINNER EXPERIENCES WHEN HE COMES TO THE POINT OF SELF-REALIZATION, TO THE PLACE OF SELF-DISCOVERY. WHEN HE REALIZES WHAT HE HAS BEEN DOING TO GOD. EBENEZER SCROOGE FOUND HELL WHEN GOD TOUCHED HIS COLD HEART AND HE REALIZED THE SELFISHNESS AND POVERTY OF HIS LIFE. LADY MACBETH FOUND HELL WHEN HER STUNNED AND SMOTHERED CONSCIENCE BEGAN TO WORK. PRODIGAL SON DISCOVERED HELL WHEN HE CAME TO HIMSELF AND REALIZED THE PAIN HE HAD CAUSED HIS FATHER.

HELL MEANS THAT GOD REFUSES TO LET A MAN GO. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT I VIEW SIN LIGHTLY. IT DOES MEAN THAT EVERY FALSE STEP HAS TO BE RETRACTED. IT DOES MEAN THAT THE SINS WE DO BY TWO AND TWO WE PAY FOR ONE BY ONE. IT DOES MEAN THAT FOR EVERY DEFIANCE OF GOD THERE IS AN AGONY OF SOUL. IT DOES MEAN THERE IS SUCH A THING AS RETRIBUTION. BUT RETRIBUTION IS NOT AN INDICATION THAT GOD HAS FINISHED WITH US AND HAS CEASED TO CARE; IT IS PROOF THAT HE STILL CARES.

"EVEN THOUGH I MAKE MY BED IN HELL THOU ART THERE". THERE IS NO ESCAPING GOD - HE LOVES US. HE follows us. HE WILL NOT LET US GO. ONE WRITER SAYS, "HELL WILL BE FOUND IN THE FAR-OFF FUTURE TO BE ONE OF THE PATHWAYS, THE STRANGEST AND HARDEST, THE SADDEST NO DOUBT, BUT STILL ONE OF THE PATHWAYS BY WHICH HUMANITY IS LED TO HEAVEN".

LET ME CLOSE BY SPEAKING OF THAT GENIUS FRANCIS THOMPSON. FATHER WANTED HIM TO BE A PRIEST. TRIED TO TRAIN FOR DOCTOR BUT FAILED. DRIVEN FROM HOME BY FATHER. ENLISTS BUT LATER REJECTED. LOSES SELF-RESPECT. OPIUM. TO LONDON TO BURY HIMSELF IN LONELINESS. OUTCAST. EARNΣ PRECARIOUS LIVING SELLING MATCHES AND OPENING CARRIAGE DOORS. FOR FIFTEEN NIGHTS IN SUCCESSION SLEPT ON STONES. GAUNT AS STARVING DOG. DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS "A VETERAN IN RAGGED REGIMENTS OF THE DAMNED". FOREVER SINKING LOWER AND LOWER. YET IT WAS FRANCIS THOMPSON
I do not imagine that there is anything in which people differ more than in their thinking about God. Of course, there are many thousands of people who never think about God at all. From morning to night, and month to month, and year to year, they never do any thinking about God; though it is not always safe to presume that a man does not think about God. You can never take even the most apparent sceptic for granted. He has his own thoughts, and he has his own questions, and he has his own doubts about his own unbelief. There are people, of course, to whom God is just a kind of banking acquaintance, to Whom they pay a little mind of worship now and again, and then forget about Him until the next time. Then there are many people to whom God is a great mystery, after Whom they seek, and when they speak about Him or think of Him, they put it in the form of Job's question: "O that I knew where I might find Him." Again and again they pray in a kind of despairing way, just as a sinking ship might send out a message into the night, hoping someone will hear and bring help; but they are never conscious of any answer. God seems so far away, and they cannot piece the mystery and the darkness.

We come now to the Psalmist, whose experience is tremendously different. He was not asking the question "O that I knew where I might find Him," or he was not going about grooping and seeking for God as if God was somehow difficult to find. His difficulty, if he had a difficulty, was that he could not get away from God. "Whither shall I go from Thy presence?" God is everywhere—the inescapable. His experience of God was the most joyful and confident thing in his life. His experience of God was for him a great reality—the reality that came to him through all experience—the heart of all reality—the experience of God in everything, and God everywhere. "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thy hand upon me."

Now, after all that is a very reasonable thing, that experience, because whoever made the world must be in it, and in every bit of it. Most people believe somebody made the world. Nobody who has got any sense and thinks about things at all, could believe that the world simply came by chance, any more than you could believe that a handful of printer's type found on a table could produce Shakespeare's plays, or a handful of colours flung on a canvas could produce a great picture. We believe someone must have made the world, and who ever made it must be in it and through it.

You go into a house to be a guest; a house which has been built and furnished by a man, and when you go through the rooms you are in touch with his personality. You can tell what kind of man he was, and what his outlook was, and as you live in the house, you are in touch with the man's personality. It is the same with God and the world, and the experience of life. The fact of the matter is that God is in the experience of everyone, whether they are conscious of it or not. God is the great Reality behind all experience, and in point of fact until we know that and realise that, and get into touch with God, we do not know the real meaning of any of life's experiences. They are just like a jigsaw puzzle in which there is no picture. You cannot put the bits together. You cannot see any meaning in them.

There are various experiences in which we find God besetting us—Nature for instance, and beauty, the sunset and the sunrise. God is in them. Wordsworth realised this. In nature he became conscious of God. You and I have felt that also in some form or other of nature.

Then God meets us in the experience of human love and friendship, the intimate things of which we do not often think, and we do not often realise the divine meaning and contact there is in them. God meets us in all the experiences that bring revenge and fault, and enables us at times to carry on when otherwise we would have found it difficult. God meets us in the great sense of moral obligation. People may say what they like, but they know perfectly well in their hearts that there are some things that are inevitably and always right, and some things that are inevitably and always wrong. We can never get away from that Voice within us that makes us feel the difference. That is God meeting us. The real proof of God, and the real sense of God, does not come to us through any one thing. It comes through continuance of