

Genesis 16:13 – El Roi, “The God who sees me”

Introduction – how do we feel about God seeing us?

My wife and I have been looking after our two delightful granddaughters for the last week. They are now six and four-and-a-half, but when they were much younger, one of the girls might put their hands over their eyes and say "You can't see me!" When children are young they have the naive belief that if they can't see you, you can't see them. Of course, they soon learn better. But there are many adults in our society today who seem to have never grown out of this delusion. They have shut their eyes to God and are convinced that God therefore cannot see them.

Do you remember the story where Adam and Eve eat the fruit which God commanded them not to eat? When they heard the sound of the Lord God coming towards them in the garden they tried to hide from him. They imagined that if they could not see God, he could not see them!

Why do we continue to entertain this strange view? Perhaps because it is troubling to imagine that an Almighty God can see everything we do and even what we think. But this is how Scripture describes God. In Psalm 139 verses 1-4 we read:

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.

It seems a rather alarming thought. And this is often why young children put their hands over their eyes: they know they have done something wrong and they want to hide from you and from your eyes which are focussed on them.

Do you find this a terrifying thought? Do you find the words of the Prayer of Preparation rather alarming when you say,

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden...?

Well, in Scripture this truth – the truth that God sees all that we say, do or even think – is portrayed as something wonderful: Psalm 139 verse 6 declares,

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain."

And most of the time, a young child is comforted by the thought that the one caring for them can see them and knows what they are doing. When they run off ahead of you they continually look back to make sure that your eye is still on them. The same is true of the child of God; it is wonderful to know that God sees us and knows all about us.

El Roi in context of Genesis 16

On the past few Sunday mornings we have been looking at various names used of God in the Old Testament. This morning we are looking at the name El Roi – "the God who sees me." This name or title of God occurs only once in the whole of Scripture, although, as we have seen, the truth it expresses is found often throughout the Bible.

The place where this title is found is in Genesis 16, in the passage that was read to us earlier.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, had not been able to have children. Sarah came up with the idea that Abraham should try to have a child with her servant Hagar. This kind of solution of having surrogate children was not uncommon in the societies among whom that Abraham was living. So Abraham slept with Hagar and she conceived. But as soon as Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began lost respect for her mistress – perhaps boasting to Sarah that she could have a baby while Sarah could not. In her anger Sarah began to treat

Hagar so badly that she ran away. But God met with Hagar and told her to return to her mistress. God promised to protect her and the child she was carrying – the boy who was to be called Ishmael.

It is in response to this promise that we read Hagar "gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" (Genesis 16:13).

I am sure that Hagar had often heard her master Abraham or her mistress Sarah talking about the living God who had revealed himself to Abraham. She must have heard about the promises that God had made to Abraham – to bless him and make him a blessing. But up to now Hagar had not thought that Abraham's God cared about *her*. Now that this same God had appeared to her and made promises to her. Hagar is filled with wonder at the realisation that God has seen her – has looked upon her in her need – and that he cares about her and will care for her.

When she says she "I have now seen the one who sees me" she means more than to say that God, in the person of the Angel of the Lord, has appeared to her: she means that she has come to realise for the first time that God sees her, knows all about her and cares for her – just as we might say, "I see", meaning, "I understand". She has come to understand and delight in this knowledge. And this truth enabled her to return to the uncomfortable and difficult situation that she faced with Abraham and Sarah.

Knowing that God cares for us helps us to face anything and everything in an attitude of confident trust. We shall return to this point later.

The God who sees, hears, is concerned and comes down to rescue

As I mentioned, this is the only place in Scripture where we find this title for God, but it is by no means the only place where we read this truth. Look, for instance, at Exodus chapter 3. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt and were being treated harshly by their taskmasters. Moses had tried to help them but had failed and had run away. Many years later, God met with Moses at a burning bush in the desert. We read that, "The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.'" (Exodus 3:7-8)

Note carefully what God here says about himself, he is a God who sees, who hears, who is concerned and who comes down to rescue. This is a wonderful description of God – his eyes, his ears and his heart are turned towards those in need. These characteristics of God are demonstrated not only as he rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt but especially and most fully in the Lord Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate proof that God sees, God hears, God is concerned and that God comes down to rescue.

When you look our world, what do you see? There is much that is beautiful and fills us with a sense of thankfulness and joy. But there is also much that is ugly, filling us with sadness and frustration. Think, for instance, of the Presidential Elections going on in the United States. How can what is arguably the most powerful country in the world, the vocal defender of freedom and democracy, have ended up with such unattractive and troubling choices for the person who will be their Chief? And there is also much in our world that is destructive and evil, much which fills us with sorrow and anger. Think for instance of the war in Syria – the barrel bombs and poison gas dropped on civilians and the vicious cruelty of IS. There is much that goes on in our world that leads us to cry, "Why doesn't God do something?"

There was a similar situation in Old Testament times when the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple and had carried away many of the inhabitants into captivity. Isaiah cries out, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). He longs for God to do something, to see and to hear and to demonstrate his concern for his people by coming down to rescue them.

And that is precisely what God *has* done in the Lord Jesus Christ. God has not turned a blind eye to the sad state of our world or a deaf ear to the cries of its suffering people. God has seen the evil done by those he created to bear his image. God has heard the cries of those who are oppressed. God has come down in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, he has come down to rescue our troubled world.

Jesus came down to this world to live among us and to demonstrate a better way of living in his devotion to the needs of others and his acts of healing. But he did more than that, much more. In giving himself over to the cruel death of the cross he bore in his own body the consequences of human hatred and human evil. He bore it all and was victorious over it all through his resurrection from the dead. And now he lives to give forgiveness to all who come to him and the hope that at his coming this world will be transformed as evil is utterly vanquished and all things are made new.

Jesus shows us that God sees, hears and is concerned for us. Jesus shows us that we are loved by God: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

And knowing this gives us hope even in the most difficult situations we may ever face. The Apostle Paul expressed it like this:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)

October 21st marked the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster in which 116 children and 28 adults were killed when the coal tip above the town of Aberfan collapsed and engulfed the junior school and destroyed a number of houses. Like me, many of you will be able to remember something of the gut wrenching reporting at the time. In this past week or so there have been many reports which have included comment by survivors. There were some who said that as a result of this disaster they could no longer believe in God. How could God allow such a disaster to happen? These were those who believed that God does not see, does not hear the cry of trapped children, does not care. But there were others who spoke of their faith in God in the face of the disaster. If God in Christ could suffer the agony of a cruel death on the cross for us then they believed that God in Christ was with them in their sufferings: that God is not impassive and distant but has become part of his suffering world – he sees and hears and is concerned and has come down to rescue; he is with those who cry out in their pain and suffering.

Hagar and ourselves

This is the truth that Hagar discovered and that caused her to cry out, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” Have you come to the same conviction? Have you seen that Almighty God sees you and knows every circumstance of your life? Though there are many things you don’t know and don’t understand, do you know this and delight in this truth?

And so we need to live every part of our lives in the light of this truth – God sees us, knows all about us and cares deeply about us and for us. We need to appreciate this not as a threat but as the delightful relationship between child and Father. We need to live consciously in God’s presence, acknowledging that he is with us, sees us and loves us and seeking to live to please him in all things.

Let me end by quoting this prayer from *Sarum Primer* of 1558 – addressing a God who sees us, hears us and is concerned for us:

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing...

Peter Misselbrook,

30/10/2016, Christ Church, Downend