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Sunday 23 November

Psalm 139¹⁻¹² / Luke 19¹⁻¹⁰

What do you think about yourself? If you're a Kiwi you'd probably be uncomfortable even thinking about that question. Trouble is we think about ourselves a lot. We ask ourselves a lot of questions daily. Am I doing OK? What do they think of me? Does he/she like me? Am I good enough? And many of us don't like the answers we hear back.

Despite all our apparent advantages in the West, a great education system, wealth, a good health system and a relatively peaceful environment we struggle increasingly with our self-image, with what we think about ourselves.

Men are increasingly falling into depression unable to deal with a sense of lack of self-worth and often lack of direction. Women, despite their so called liberation from a self-serving, misogynistic, sexually objectifying male culture seem more than ever to be concerned about whether they look attractive to males and the rise of such disturbing conditions as bulimia, anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders bears stark testament to this preoccupation with body image.

In short the 'self' is a problem for us. We struggle with who we are and with who others see us. We struggle to believe in our own worth and we struggle to imagine a good future for us because of this.

Of course the opposite can be true as we saw last time with Tiger Woods. We can become completely over confident and, indeed, arrogant about self though this is, I suspect less common than we think. This interesting thing about this phenomenon is that it is derived from the same root – the fact that we struggle to really know who we are. Tiger Woods confessed very openly that his marriage ending promiscuity was a result of... “a self-reliance [that] made me think I could tackle the world by myself. It made me think that if I was successful at golf, then I was invincible.” Woods summary is instructive because he then says... “Now I know, that no matter how tough or strong we are, we need to rely on others.”

How do we understand self? Who tells us who we are? Who can we believe? Clearly our own unaided view of our 'self' is often inaccurate and mistaken. We can so easily over-estimate who we are or we can under-estimate who we are. We can so easily miss important queues about ourselves. But what are we to think about Wood's claim that in listening to **others** we get a much more accurate take on who we are? Is this the case?

If we look at the Bible I think we'd have to give him a pass mark. Real self-knowledge in the Bible **is** a product of relationship with

others. Wise people listen to wise people. People wanting to grow learn to listen to those they trust. There is, however, a 'but' here... **But those people must be godly in their orientation, they must be trustworthy. Nothing ruins character or self-image quicker than the company, as proverbs would say, of fools!**

Take the story of Zacchaeus for example. One thing that is abundantly clear here is that in the opinion of most others Zacchaeus was not a nice person – indeed, he was a person to avoid, 'bad' person – a thief no less. If Jesus had been listening to those opinions – the opinion of many others, he would have never gone with Zacchaeus to his place for a meal, never shared his hospitality, never pronounced salvation over him. More than this however, what would Zacchaeus have thought of himself?! **Very little I suggest. He may even have hated himself.** But Jesus knew better. He knew better than to trust the opinion of the majority of people who knew Zacchaeus. So the opinion of others does count but it is also something that can also be entirely wrong.

I wonder if you've felt devastated by the opinion of others. I wonder if you know what it's like to feel despised, rejected, misunderstood. I wonder if you've believed the opinion of others when they've thought this way. If you have then take heart, there's a better place to discover who you are. Others are often not right about us even if sometimes they are and even if

sometimes they're right about some things. Others can be right but they can also be wrong...

²⁰ Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,
but the companion of fools suffers harm. (Prov 13)

and again Paul will say this in 1 Corinthians 15

³³Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character.

Back to the reflection of Tiger Woods, can we then believe that our own self-reflection is completely unreliable? Are we never to trust our own opinion of ourselves? Again I suspect the answer needs to be equivocal. Sometimes we can and sometimes we can't. Sometimes we can have real insight into who we are and sometimes we are just way off beam. The Bible is convinced that our own corruption is a real problem here and Paul will say...

²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Col 3)

Whatever else this may mean it must mean that who we are cannot be simply 'read off' from our thinking. We cannot simply know ourselves unaided. We are, in one sense, the blind leading

the blind when it comes to perceiving ourselves. So where does this leave us?

It leaves us needing very much a third source of knowledge about self – a source which is outside of ourselves but which is completely reliable and accessible. We need a source of knowledge who knows us better than we know ourselves and who not only knows but, and this is the most important thing, is completely committed to us – who loves us.

Interestingly enough there are very clear parallels elsewhere in life and one is in the sports arena. One of the age old phenomena of the sporting world is that of coaching. These days coaches are attached to almost every sporting team and individual. Now of course some teams and people who play very much in the social area don't have coaches although some do. But if you play any kind of serious sport you will have a coach. What does a coach provide?

Coaches provide two things. Firstly they provide a trustworthy source of information about us. Yes they can be hard at times or at least the information they provide may not be what we want to hear but we know we can rely on it because, and this is the second thing they provide, they're on our side, they're for us, they're committed to our success.

Bill Gates has said... “Everyone needs a coach. It doesn't matter whether you're a basketball player, a tennis player, a gymnast or a bridge player.”

Coaching is necessary because only someone else can really see what we're doing right or wrong and comment on it and also because we all need a cheer leader at times. We need coaches if we want to play sport to a higher level. We need coaches in academic work though we usually call them teachers and we need life coaches at times as well.

Ara Parasheghian has said “A good coach will make his players see what they can be rather than what they are.”

In regard to our ‘selves’ the great need you and I have is to have a coach who can provide all the above and more and the wonderful thing is that we have such a coach. We have One who is so committed to us that He died for us. We have One who knows us through and through because He created us. We have One who is so interested in our ongoing development that He has provided a special person to speak into our lives any time we want to listen – to guide us and to help us know His love in every and any situation. Who is it?

God is our Creator. No one knows us better than God. Christ the Son died for us as the ultimate sign of God's love for us and the Spirit has been left to speak into our lives and to give us guidance and advice in any and every situation. And we so need

to hear what the Spirit says friends because we will not understand ourselves apart from the work of God through the Spirit.

No one understands our situation more than God. He is our coach and our very best friend. When we are unhappy with ourselves, when we are beginning to condemn ourselves, when we are struggling in any way with ourselves – God is the One we need to be listening to. Like a wonderful mother or father – we may not hear approval for what we've done but we will never hear rejection. We may not hear a 'yes' to everything we want or want to do but we will never hear ridicule for wanting those things.

In our reading today from Psalm 139 we heard these words...

Psalm 139

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

There is so much in here that should encourage us in this journey but what is most obvious is how well God knows us. God has searched us – God has not just searched for us but God has searched **in** us. God knows us through and through and so our actions, our daily schedule, our thoughts and our words are never a surprise to God. What is more God is everywhere – God is around us and still we are not rejected or despised for our foolishness, our mistakes, our inadequacies and our confusion. Why? Because this is the God who loves us and who never gives up on us. This is the God who walks with us in all things.

In Palestine today, it is still possible to witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly saw two thousand years ago, that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. Often those flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together—eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call—a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd's sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and they know it is this person who

knows them and their needs intimately. He is the One they trust and so he is the only one they will follow.

Don't despair about you **self**. Come to the One who can help you see both your own beauty and hope for your future. AMEN.