Have you ever experienced being asked a question and you don't even know where to begin to answer it? There are so many interconnected bits that you just don't know where to start. Well, if that's true of any question, it is most certainly true of the question, 'What is God like?' How can you do justice to that? If 'love is a many splendored thing', as the poem goes, then what could we say about God's nature? If you can hold up a diamond and see every facet, glinting in the sun, and you marvel at its beauty, then what about God's perfect character?

And over the summer we've tried to show just some of the facets of the diamond of that character and nature, and today we're going to look at another: we're going to look at what's called God's omnipresence – that God is present everywhere.

Inescapable Goodness

When we were on holiday recently we stopped off in a small town we didn't know, but we were looking for a specific street where a market was happening. And I was stood in front of one of those street maps on a wall, trying to find where we wanted to go. And I could find the street quickly enough, but what I didn't know was where we were. What I needed was the map to have one of those red dots with a pointy arrow saying, 'you are here.'

Because that's the truth for you and me isn't it? If you are stood looking at the map, on a wall, in this street, then you're here, and you're not anywhere else. You can't be anywhere else. We can only be in one place at one time. Which is why there are those time when you're a parent, when you get all exasperated and say, 'look I can't be in two places at once!' Even you mums who can multi-task, not even you can multi-site.

But things are different with God. And the first clue you get for that comes in the very first verse of the Bible: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). So God created space. So far from God being limited by space and time as you and I are - one place at one time - God creates space and possesses space – every corner of it. As Moses told the people of Israel, 'Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it' (Deut 10:14). So over every corner of creation God says, 'these things are mine'. They don't possess him – they don't limit him. He possesses them. It's why one theologian calls him, 'the Lord of space.'

But all of that could be true and God be absent. God could create and possess and then stand apart from his creation. Rather than a single red dot and arrow for you and me saying, 'you are here' – there could be no dot or arrows at all for God. An absentee God.

But the Bible tells us the very opposite is true. It tells us that he fills every part of creation. And even Solomon knew that. And I say 'even Solomon' because King Solomon set about building a magnificent temple for God. It was to be *the* physical expression of the people of Israel as the people of God. This was to a place where God dwelt, a place where people could come and worship God. This was to be God's house, a place where God was localised. So if ever there was to be a place where you could put a red dot and say God is here, this was it. But

listen to what Solomon said at the dedication of that temple: "But will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Did God dwell in the temple at Jerusalem? Sure he did. Was he present there? Absolutely. But Solomon knew that whilst that was true, nothing could contain God. Nothing could limit him. He wasn't just present there, he was and is present everywhere. So if there was a street map of the universe every minute pixel would have to be coloured red, because God is present everywhere at every time.

And it's knowing that, that can give you an incredible sense of security in your life. Listen again to those words from Ps 139 that were read to us earlier. 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there' (Ps 139:7-8). In other words, there is nowhere, not in heaven or in hell, not in the mountain top experiences of life, or its darkest valleys, where God is not present.

And because of that you can know with absolute certainty, that whatever you are going through in life, he is present. Imagine a child who has gone shopping with her mother in a large city, but in the crush of shoppers she gets separated from her mother. Imagine the rising sense of panic and fear she feels as she begins to imagine that her mother has left her. Now whilst the feelings of panic might be less intense, there can be those moments or seasons in your life when it feels like you are lost, or abandoned by God. But when you know the truth that God is always present, that truth can slay that panic. You are never lost to him.

And because he is everywhere, he is present in every situation you find yourself in. Present when you have that difficult conversation you don't want to have; present in the interview room for that new job; present, by your side, as you take that exam. He is around every corner that life turns. He never loses sight of you.

When the National Health Service was founded in the UK after the Second World War, it promised that it would be there for you 'from the cradle to the grave'. From the beginning of life to the end of life. But organisations like that let you down. You think they'll be there when you need them, but you find their promises are less that cast-iron. But God never lets you down.

You see, in Psalm 139 the psalmist describes how God is not just present but intimately involved in our lives, crafting us even before the cradle: 'For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb' (Ps 139:13).

But he wasn't present with you when you were growing inside your mother, only to desert you later in life, when things get hard, and dark. You see, while God does not promise you answers as to why you go through what you go through, he does promise you his presence. Listen to David in his most famous psalm: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me' (Ps 23:4). Why can David fear no evil when he passes through death's valley? Because he knows that the Lord is with him. That he is present even in life's darkest moments – from before the cradle to the grave. He was there at your beginning, the craftsman who knitted you together in the dark of

your mother's womb, and he will be with you to the end, the good shepherd who guides you through the darkness of the valley of death.

But in between, in every circumstance of life, and every turn of life, in the new and the exciting, in the familiar and the routine, God is there. As Psalm 139 says, 'If I take the wings of the morning…' if I go as far east as I can, as far as the sun-rise, or 'dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea' which for someone on the shores of the Mediterranean meant 'as far west as I can', beyond the most distant horizon, wherever I go in life, 'even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me' (Ps 139:9-10).

It is not that God pursues you to these extremes of East or West, it is that when you get there he is already there. Ready to guide you, ready to strengthen you, ready to comfort you, ready to correct you. So there is nowhere in life that you can go, no dark depth of failure that you can plumb, no height of success that you can scale, that is out of his reach. There is nothing you can experience that is out of his control or outside his presence. It is God's inescapable goodness.

But…

You see, most commentators agree that when the psalmist talks of God's inescapable presence in Ps 139, his feelings are at least somewhat mixed. Is he glad that he can never escape God's presence, or be lost to God's goodness? Sure he is. But that also means he has no-where to hide.

Inescapable Holiness

Listen again to how the psalmist puts it: 'Where shall I flee from your presence?' (Ps 139:7). Where indeed? If God is everywhere, there are no nooks, no crannies, no secret hiding place from his presence, are there? But ask yourself, why would anyone want to flee the inescapable presence and goodness of God? Why would anyone want to hide themselves from the all-penetrating gaze of God?

Well, just think of the very first people who tried to do that. Genesis tells the story of how Adam and Eve first disobeyed God, by taking the fruit. And what happened next was that for the first time in their lives they became aware of their nakedness, for the first time they experienced shame, and they tried to cover that shame, to hide from each other, with fig leaves. But if you read on in the story, something deeper was going on there. Because it wasn't just their nakedness they became aware of, it was their guilt. Genesis 3:8, 'And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.'

But it's not just them is it? At one time or another, haven't we all wanted to hide, or pretend we can hide from God, and his all-searching gaze? But what they discovered and what we all discover is that you cannot hide from God – there is nowhere you can flee from his presence. As the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? Declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jer 23:23-24). It's like a fugitive from justice,

constantly running, always looking over his shoulder, who runs around a street corner, thinking he can escape, only to find his pursuer stood there, waiting for him.

And when we want to do something wrong, we think we can retreat ever further inwards, into some secret, confidential place, where we cannot be seen, where we think we are private. We go inside, or into an inner room, we draw the curtains, or turn the computer screen. Or we go into our inner thought life, thinking that no-one can see us there. We think that we can sin in secret. But all the time God is present. We think we can go further and further inside, but the further we go, the closer he comes. There is no-where to hide.

In 1907, a young man died having spent years living as a vagrant and heroin addict on the streets of London. His name was Francis Thompson and before he died, he wrote a poem called the Hound of Heaven, that describes how he had tried in vain to run from God's presence.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine 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 chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

And Thompson discovered that he could not outrun God, that he could never escape that searching gaze, or that voice that beat upon his heart. That like a hound on a hunt, it relentlessly hunted him down. That no matter how far in he went, no matter what he filled his life with, or tried to numb his pain with, he could not escape God's presence.

Now maybe you've experienced the discomfort of having someone hold your gaze for longer than is comfortable, or felt awkwardly, uncomfortably self-aware when stared at. But that is nothing in comparison to the feeling that God sees into the inner recesses of your heart, that he is present even in your secret places. You see, as Isaiah the prophet discovered in his terrifying encounter with God in Isaiah 6, God's presence is a holy presence, and it is deeply, profoundly, unsettling: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is 6:5).

Isaiah knew that if he was to be able to stand under the perpetual gaze of the one who saw all things, if he was to be able to live in the presence of inescapable holiness, then he needed to be cleansed. We all do.

But what will cleanse us from our guiltiness? What can lead us out of the darkness of our secret places into the glorious light of his presence?

Well, in his gospel, John quotes from Isaiah's encounter with this inescapably holy God, and this is what John writes, 'Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him' (John 12:41). Only the 'him' that John is speaking about is Jesus.

Christ - The One to Flee To

Now just go back to the question Solomon asked at the dedication of the temple: 'But will God indeed dwell on earth?' (1 Kings 8:27). And in his grace God did fill that temple. But that was just a foretaste of what God would do. And some 900 years later, God did the unthinkable. The one who fills heaven and the highest heaven, was himself knitted together in the secret place of his mother's womb, and the Son of God become a man and dwelt on earth. One greater than the temple had come.

And as a man, he was humiliated in public, so that you and I might never face the ultimate shame for our sins committed in private. And he was stripped naked so that you and I might be clothed in better clothing than Adam and Eve's fig leaves – in a robe of his righteousness. And at the cross, his body was stained with his own blood, as he gave his life for our sins, so that you and I might be washed clean of them. And he was excluded from God's presence, so that you and I need never fear being in the presence of the one who is inescapably good and inescapably holy.

And when you know what God has done for you in Christ, you won't want to flee from him, you'll flee to him. And you'll find refuge, real refuge, in your heavenly Father's embrace.

And knowing that you live daily in the reality of his presence will radically alter the way you see things.

Firstly, it will alter the way you see sin. It's not just that guilt will drive you away from sin, but you'll flee sin and flee to Jesus, because you won't want to grieve the one who gave himself for you. And you won't want to do that which would break your enjoyment of Christ's presence. So as you grow in your delight of God's presence, sin will increasingly lose its attractiveness to you.

Secondly, it will alter the way you see the suffering and the trials God allows you to go through. This last week Su and I were chatting with one of our neighbours. And she was in tears as she told us how she missed her father who died a few years back. She described how he would sit on her garden bench, and they would talk about life. But now he's gone and there is no one to sit in the garden with her, no one to talk to about the health and relationship issues her family faces. But when you know the love of God for you in Jesus, when you know his

presence always with you in the garden of your life, you know you're never alone, no matter what you're facing. Our heavenly Father said to the people of Israel, and he says to you who put your trust in Jesus: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you' (Is 43:1-2).

You see, when you go through hard times, rather than it feel like God is inescapably present, it can feel as if you're alone, that God has checked out. But how could the one who gave his Son to redeem you, ever let you go? He has already proved the measure of his love for you at the cross. And Jesus went through the flood-waters of trials, to bring you into his presence, so why would he now dump you? And the truth of his love, and the promise of his presence, are more real than your feelings. And when you know that, then the love, and the death and the resurrection of Christ will speak louder than your doubts. And the result will be a deep, overcoming joy, even in the midst of your pain, because, as Psalm 16 says, 'In your presence there is fullness of joy." (Ps 16:11)

But thirdly, the knowledge that, because of Jesus, you live daily in his presence, will alter the way you respond when he asks you to do hard things. When God told Moses to return to Egypt and lead the people to freedom, Moses was horrified. 'Who am I that I should go?" Which is Hebrew for, 'there's no way I can do that!' And God's response? "I will be with you" (Ex 3:11-12). And it is this promise of his presence with you that can give you the courage to do those hard things that you know, on your own, you can't do. It's what gives you the boldness to say, 'I cannot, but he can, so let's do it.'

I mean, take a really down to earth example. For those of you who are married, or hope to be married: consider your wedding vows. "I take you to be my wedded wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forward. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." Now how can you say that? That whatever life throws at you, whatever you go through, you will never leave this other one, you will never turn your back on them, you will never abandon them, you will always be there for them, until death parts you. How can you say that? You can say it, and mean it, and live it, when you know that God, who gives you the strength to do it, will never leave you, will never forsake you, and even death cannot separate you from him.

But finally, knowing that because of Jesus, you can live daily in his presence will alter how you see talking about him to others, and sharing your faith. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations… and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20). How can you risk your reputation or others' put-downs, or face down the fear of what others might think of you? Because you know that this inescapably good and holy God loves you so much Christ died for you, and he is with you. So it doesn't matter what others think.

But you also know he loves them, and you want them to know that. So, you'll build friendships with your neighbours and colleagues, and you'll love them and serve them, and as God gives you the opportunity you'll tell them, about the God who is always present everywhere, but who came as a man and gave his life, to bring them into the joy of his presence, now and forever.