



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

14th April, 2023

"Simon, son of John,...." - "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"
John 21:15; Psalm 139:7-10

Nineteenth century poet Francis Thompson led a short and troubled life. Academically bright but physically frail, he failed to meet the expectations of a demanding father, and ended up sleeping rough in London. After one of his poems was published in a magazine, its publishers found him and arranged for him to stay with a Christian community in a rural area. It was there that his poetry flourished, and he wrote what was said to be his masterpiece, a long, complex work called, *"The Hound of Heaven"*

The central idea of the poem -the relentless pursuit of a 'Hound'- doesn't sit easily with our sense of Jesus as the loving Shepherd, seeking the lost sheep rather than hunting it down! It raises questions like, "Am I Peter, being 'hounded' by Jesus after his denial (John 21:15)? Am I Jonah fleeing from God or the lost sheep longing to be found (Luke 15)?" Psalm 139 helps us understand. Verse 7, like Thompson's poem, sounds as if I am trying to evade God, to escape him, *"Where can I go... Where can I flee...?"*. It reads like the breathless fear of the hunted, but then it calms to a sense of safety in the arms of God: *"...your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast"*. There is relief in being found, held and guided, like that of a lost child found, protected and led.

So it is with Thompson's poem, the heart-outpouring of one who disappointed parents, failed in human achievement, was rejected from military service on health grounds, and went from excelling at university to selling newspapers on the streets and sleeping rough. His poem begins:

*"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 midst of tears
I hid from Him....."*

As the poem unfolds there is a sense of one who -whilst feeling 'hunted'- wants, needs and longs to be 'caught' by God (*"I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!"*). The fleeing human soul realises its need for God. It is as if the hunted becomes the hunter, the sought becomes the seeker for what only God can give.

It ends with the poet hearing from God, the 'Hound of Heaven', who shows him that he is losing the fulfilments of life because he tried to 'lose' God from his life: *"Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me! Strange, piteous, futile thing!"* And finally, the 'Hound' -seen now more as a deliverer than a hunter- declares, *"I am He Whom thou seekest!"* That last line shows that the one who drives God from his/her life drives out what God's love alone can bring.

Like the psalmist and the poet, many of us -and many of those we care about- have, through one experience or another, felt the need for the love of God, although it is from Him we might at times want to flee.

Psalm 139 is our story, -and the Apostle Peter's. May God be in our seeking and in being sought, -and found.