

ENCOMPASSING GOD

David Adam



*To Denise, whose love and sharing
makes my writing possible*

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You encompass me behind and before
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
so high that I cannot attain it.

(Psalm 139.4–5,
Common Worship: Daily Prayer)

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Introduction

Encompassing God is not about what we do but about what God is doing all the time. God holds us and all creation in his loving embrace: there is not anywhere or anything without God. This book aims to encourage people to give their attention to this reality, to become aware of it, to affirm it, and to rejoice in the presence of God. We need to discover the joy that ‘we abide in him and he in us’ (1 John 4.13).

God encompasses us whether we notice this or choose to ignore it. Just as the air is about us and within us, God’s presence surrounds and fills us. We are all immersed in him: those who are baptized and those who are not; Christians, Jews, Muslims, people of other faiths and people of none. But though God is in us, he is not ours to possess. The Church does not have a monopoly on God and cannot cage him in its buildings or its dogma, though it has often tried to.

We cannot bring God to another person, because he is already within every one of us – as much with the criminal as he is with the bishop, though each can fail to notice him. We can, however, help each other discover God’s presence. And sometimes we find that God’s presence is revealed to us by someone else. I can remember once many years ago thinking that I would take God to a parishioner who was ill. Well, I found that God was there long before I arrived! He had been with this elderly, frail lady for such a length of time that they were friends and she was more relaxed in his presence than I was. She could say ‘The Lord is here’ with a joyful affirmation in all her troubles.

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As God is with us and within us, there is no need to search for him, though we do need to learn how to attune ourselves to his presence. In our modern world, sound waves and television images are always around but we need to tune in our digital TV to hear and see them. In a similar way, we need to learn how to turn our attention to God and to rejoice in his presence, as we take the great journey of discovery to know that ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17.28).

The writing of this book was born to some degree out of frustration. I will be mentioning some of the issues that have bothered me regarding our modes of worship and how we express God’s presence. I would then like to offer you a way of praying that I believe will help you personally to consider the pace you live at and to explore how you may deepen your worship. We will also look at outreach to others and the part we can play in helping those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death to become aware that God *is* actually with them and loves them.

All through my ministry, I’ve been fortunate to be involved with groups of teenagers and young adults who want to grow in the faith. Often, when I was curate in West Auckland and Hartlepool, I would be told that the services were difficult, if not plain dull. Yet all concerned were sure that God is not dull – the vicar and the curate could be, but God never! These young folk were looking for ways of exploring the wonder of the presence of God and the reality of his love. I am passionate about the services of Matins, Holy Communion and Evensong, and I find great depths in the Psalms. But to present these to new Christians as the way to God is like taking them into a gallery of Old Masters and expecting them to enjoy the riches of art immediately. No age can simply live off past glories; it also needs to communicate in a way that is meaningful for its

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own time. I knew I had to experiment with worship and find new expressions of the liturgy.

At various stages of our lives, we will find that different forms of worship help keep us aware that we are in God's presence and grace. We should not feel too tightly tied to the words in a book, but rather allow ourselves to be touched by the power of God they reveal. Sometimes, in awe, my young folk and I would move into deep silence where we would remain receptive and open to the reality that we are one in him. At other times we would be led into joyful singing of God's praise.

I believe there is a great need to restore in our services the balance between speech and silence, action and stillness, so that we allow time for God to communicate with us. So many of our services run to a fixed agenda and are crammed with activity. God scarcely gets a look-in! We offer people words, when what they want is the Word made flesh. We use formulas without ever helping people to rejoice in what we convey. For example, services often start with 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', followed by 'The Lord be with you: and also with you', or something similar. In about 20 seconds we have uttered great wonders without pause for breath or thought. I have more than once suggested we need no more words than these, for if we recognize their true meaning, we'll go home rejoicing, with the depth of what has been said vibrating in our lives. Such words should be able to open the eyes of the blind, and make people aware that they are in God's presence. Such words should remind people of their baptism and that they are immersed in the very being of God: we dwell in him. When we use these opening words, have we rested in the presence, in the peace, in the power of God? Have we spent time joyously abiding in the light, in the love, in the leading of God? Were those fleeting seconds communicating that we are truly in the

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goodness, the grace and the guiding of God: that we are in the strength, in the salvation, in the seeking of God? Did we rejoice in the reality that the Lord *is* here? Was our God allowed to get a word in before the notices or a hymn? Enough questions! Take your time to abide in him now. Stop and rejoice ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’, in the very presence and power of your God, who is with you, about you and within you.

In prayer, what is more important than what we are doing is what God is doing to us, with us and through us. I saw a sticker on a car windscreen once that said, ‘Prayer makes God jump’. I noticed there was an L-plate just below the sticker and hoped the driver would learn more about who is at work in our prayers. Prayer is not about making God do, for that would be magic, but about opening our lives to the ever-present God so that he can work in us and through us. Intercession begins by perceiving that we are created by God and encompassed by him. All true intercession is dependent on this recognition and indwelling.

Prayer is as much about the space between the words as the words themselves: it is about being aware of the Holy One in our midst. We shape who we are by the attitudes we have, by the patterns we create for ourselves. Not only prayer, but life and work too are less irksome if we discover we are working with the Holy One who dwells with us as we dwell in him. In prayer, do we make room for each word to resonate or do we speed onto the next one? The faster we go, the less we truly see what is and who is about us. Give each word, each space, each comma, each full stop the attention it is due and allow yourself to be tuned to God’s presence. God is not absent from us but we are absent from him when we stand in his presence and ignore him. We are caught talking about and talking to God but failing to listen to or be fully aware of him. Worship

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is not of the mind alone; it is an act of devotion. Prayer is about heart-to-heart speaking and listening, which allows space for the other to speak too. We need to leave room in our worship for reverence, receptivity and the reception of our God: this can lead to the revelation that ‘Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!’ (Genesis 28.16). Eternity is not beyond us, nor is it only available after death. It is here and now in the presence of God, and he awaits our awareness and our rejoicing in him. God is not the object of our prayers but the subject, and prayer begins with the removal of all obstacles that prevent him communicating with us. We don’t want an obsession with formulas, ideas or techniques to make us lose sight of the reality that prayer is about God at work in our lives and in the world. Stillness and space give us the opportunity to become more open to him, and focusing our attention fully on God is nothing less than life-transfiguring.

Having said this, I believe that there is great value to be found in recitation and repetition, for these help us enter into the essence of what is being said. Recitation allows words to vibrate on our lips and ears, while in repetition we seek to let them vibrate in our lives: we hold them in our hearts; we ponder them in our inner being. As words gain a new depth, a single term or phrase can bring us to a profound awareness of the riches it points to. Words are not relics of the past: they may have a great history but they can be new and fresh and meaningful for us and help us grow. In worship we should be ready to be changed, to be transfigured, and to be thrilled by the sacredness of all life and the holiness of every place, for the Lord is here and his Spirit is with us.

To help deepen people’s awareness of God, I’ve often used the first 11 verses of Psalm 139, which is a prayer that looks at God in six different directions. Read the Psalm slowly and see if you discover them.

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O Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You mark out my journeys and my resting place
and are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
but you, O Lord, know it altogether.
You encompass me behind and before
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go then from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand shall lead me,
your right hand hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will cover me
and the light around me turn to night,’
Even the darkness is no darkness with you;
the night is as clear as the day;
darkness and light are to you both alike.

(Common Worship Daily Prayer,
Church House Publishing, 2005)

Did you find each of the directions? If not, go over the psalm again. Now notice that the psalmist begins by addressing God and assuming his presence. This same God is present with you and you could apply the ‘facts’ of this psalm (below) to yourself. Read through each verse of the psalm with God, not just in word but by resting in his presence. Then look at the list of

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facts. Say ‘God’, leave a short pause, then contemplate one line and pause for a minute or so. Now say out loud the verse the fact relates to (given at the end of each line) and the fact itself. This act of affirmation should take 20 minutes at least. It is a good way of tuning into how God encompasses you, and is with you wherever you are.

THE FACTS

God, you know me and my thoughts. 139.1

God, you know where I am. 139.2–3

God, you know all I say. 139.4

God, you encompass me. 139.5

God, you are before me. 139.4–5

God, you are behind me 139.4–5

God, you are beyond my understanding. 139.5

God, there is nowhere without you. 139.6

God, you are above me. 139.7

God, you are beneath me. 139.7

God, you are on my right. 139.8–9

God, you are on my left. 139.8–9

God, you are with me even in my darkness. 139.10–11

This meditation on the wonder of being in the presence of the Almighty expresses the relationship between God and us. We are the ‘object’ of God’s action. It is primarily God who is at work and we rejoice in, and affirm, his activity in our lives. In line after line, God and self are woven together, emphasizing that we don’t just know about God but know him, as he knows us. God is always there, not in a threatening way like a policeman watching in judgement, but as a lover who is a ready help, a strength and support.

God’s knowledge of you is comprehensive. He knows your sitting down and your rising up, your thoughts, your journeys,

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your places of rest, and all that you say. ‘You have searched me out’ means ‘you have dug deep into the depths of me and know me fully’. This is not a surface looking at but the deep familiarity of a relationship. It is intimate knowledge: God looks at you with the eyes of love: he knows the real you, and though he knows you fully, he still lays his hand upon you in blessing (139.1–4).

The knowledge of such a presence and love should fill you with wonder and awe. It is actually more than you can take in or put into words, but you can experience it in your life nevertheless (139.5).

God is present wherever you are, whatever your situation. If you find yourself rising up in joy, if all is going well with you, if you feel you are in heaven, God is there. If you descend to the depths, if life seems like the pits, like hell or you feel as good as dead, God is still with you. He never leaves you (Psalm 139.6–7).

Go as far as you can go to the east: God is still there at the beginning of each morning, there at its dawning, even if it is dull and stormy. You can communicate with God at the start of each day. Or go as far as you can to the west: God is there also. The west is the place of the setting sun, and the unknown: God is still present. Whichever direction you go, God is with you (Psalm 139.8).

You may not always feel you know where you are going but you can learn to know who is with you. I often project forward 50 years. Where will I be? I do not know, but I know who I will be with, for I will be with God. God accompanies you and is ready to guide you. God will uphold you and give you courage. He will never – not ever – let you go. His hand is ready to grasp you and lead you (Psalm 139.9).

We have now looked in six directions and affirmed that God is in all of them. To these we can add, not another direction, but a new dimension, that of darkness. Darkness can come upon us in any place: even the dawn can be gloomy, cheerless

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and full of foreboding. In the fullness of life we can suddenly enter into darkness. Illnesses, bereavement, betrayal, loneliness, doubt and fear can all bring it about. In every life there are times when the light around us turns to night and we find ourselves groping our way forward. We may even feel Godforsaken but God never leaves us. Even if we lose our grip on God, he does not let us go and with him the night can become as clear as the day (139.10–11).

Such wonderful knowledge exceeds our intellectual understanding but it is not beyond our personal experience to feel communion with the one who knows us so well. This is a relationship of love not judgement, of liberation and support not condemnation, for God will never abandon us. The Celtic peoples often expressed this reality in prayers of encompassment for themselves and for others. Here is one such prayer from a collection gathered from the Islands and Highlands of Scotland by Alexander Carmichael in the nineteenth century. Affirm it for yourself or a loved one.

ENCOMPASSING

The compassing of God be on thee,
The compassing of the God of life.

The compassing of Christ be on thee,
The compassing of the Christ of love.

The compassing of the Spirit be on thee,
The compassing of the Spirit of Grace.

The compassing of the Three be on thee,
The compassing of the Three preserve thee,
The compassing of the Three preserve thee.

(Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*,
Volume III, Scottish Academic Press, 1976, p. 105)

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The aim of encompassing or encircling prayers is to affirm that we are immersed in the presence of God, surrounded by him and enfolded in his love. In making such an affirmation, the Celts said they were ‘making a caim’. If you wanted to do this, you would begin by facing east, raising your right hand and pointing forward. Then you would turn slowly in a sun-wise or clockwise direction until you had completed a circle. While you were doing this you could simply say ‘Circle me, O God’ or ‘God encompasses me’ or ‘God is about me’. The Celts chose to go sun-wise which was called ‘going deasil’; opposite to this is widdershins which was going against the clock and the way of the world. The Celts warned if you went against the way of the world too often something terrible was likely to happen to you. This in itself is acting out a truth: we cannot be seeking help from God if we are going against nature.

I can still remember when I was 11 and in a woodwork class. I was having some difficulty with my project and took a plane apart three times to sharpen the blade. Yet when I used it, I was still roughing up the wood. The lesson was almost at an end when the teacher came and said, ‘It’s no use sharpening the blade if you will continue to go against the grain!’ There is a lesson for life here. If you go against the grain in nature you should expect life to be rough.

When Celtic people met trouble or evil, they would draw the caim around themselves as a person would pull a cloak about them in a storm. Because we are not almighty, we need to call upon the Almighty. Rather than opting out, running away or wallowing in our troubles, we can turn to the one who gives us the power to live life in all its fullness. When we cannot lift ourselves up or pull ourselves together, help is at hand from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Why exhaust ourselves by going on alone when we can rest and acknowledge that God

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is all too ready to aid us? Rather than revealing our weakness, putting our faith in him gives us the courage to stand and to withstand all kinds of troubles – along with the assurance to be ourselves in the midst of these – for we know we are no longer operating in our strength alone.

Many of the saints have expressed the encompassing of God. In the fourth century, in his ‘Treatise on the Trinity’, Hilary of Poitiers wrote:

I came to see that there is no space without God: space does not exist apart from God. God is in heaven, in hell and beyond the seas. God lives in everything and enfolds everything. God embraces all that is, and is embraced by the universe: confined to no part within it he encompasses all that exists.

(Quoted in Robert Atwell, *Celebrating the Saints*, SCM Press, 2004, p. 37)

Julian of Norwich, in the fourteenth century, more than once expressed we are ‘wrapped around and enfolded in God’:

He is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love, and he will never let us go.

(Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, p. 1)

And again she said:

As the body is clad in clothes, and the flesh in skin, and the bones in flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we clothed, body and soul, in the goodness of God and enfolded in it.

(Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love*, p. 6)

In the twentieth century, Teilhard de Chardin expressed the same encompassing in his phrase *Le Milieu divin*, which is the title of one of his most famous books:

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God who made man that he might seek him – God whom we try to apprehend by the groping of our lives – that self-same God is as pervasive and perceptible as the atmosphere in which we are bathed. He encompasses us on all sides, like the world itself. What prevents you, then, from enfolding him in your arms? Only one thing: your inability to see him . . . The true God, the Christian God, will under your gaze, invade the universe . . . He will penetrate it as a ray of light does a crystal . . . God truly waits for us in things, unless indeed he advances to meet us.

(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu divin*,
Collins Fontana, 1975, pp. 46–7)

This same encompassing is expressed in many hymns. I like this one in particular:

In heav'ly love abiding,
no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding,
for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me,
my heart may low be laid;
but God is round about me
and can I be dismayed?

(Anna Laetitia Waring, 1820–1910)

When I first sang these words it was with a great sense of opting out, for I imagined they were about when we die and are in heaven! But, in fact, this heavenly love is being sung of by someone who is rejoicing in the love and power of God *now*, while struggling with the ways of the world. At this very moment, we can rejoice in God's love and know that we not only abide in his love but in his kingdom, which is the kingdom of heaven.

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In the next chapter, we will explore ‘The prayer of seven directions’. But first, you might like to affirm the encompassing of God in these words of mine. Spend time with them until you can personally say with some assurance, ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17.28).

Circle me, O God
Keep hope within
Despair without.

Circle me, O God,
Keep peace within
Keep turmoil out.

Circle me, O God,
Keep calm within
Keep storms without.

Circle me, O God,
Keep strength within
Keep weakness out.

(David Adam, *The Edge of Glory*,
Triangle/SPCK, 1985,
p. 8, adapted)

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goodness, the grace and the guiding of God: that we are in the strength, in the salvation, in the seeking of God? Did we rejoice in the reality that the Lord *is* here? Was our God allowed to get a word in before the notices or a hymn? Enough questions! Take your time to abide in him now. Stop and rejoice ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’, in the very presence and power of your God, who is with you, about you and within you.

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