If you Google who/what/where is God? into your computer or other internet device, you get a wide range of responses. On the other hand, I remember one occasion when someone tried such a question on their iphone voice search, only to get the robot response: cannot compute, too many variables or some such wording – at least it didn’t suggest the answer 42! I’ve often thought that if someone asks a Christian “What is God like?”, the baseline answer is “God is like Jesus”. It’s why we have our special ceremonial for reading the Gospel lesson in our Eucharist. It’s our way of emphasising the direct testimony about Jesus: “Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John”.

Our Gospel reading today contains many utterly astonishing statements made by Jesus about himself. Of course, sceptics would say, “How do we know he actually said these things? They didn’t have recording equipment then.” Well, as a matter of fact, they did! In societies where people are not able to be literate, or literature is largely unobtainable, people rely on their powers of memory. Because such memorising is unnecessary for us, we forget that, for example, bards and minstrels could remember hundreds of songs; some monks committed the whole Psalter to memory. Nearer our time, the Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler could repeat Virgil’s Aeneid from beginning to end without hesitation – that’s 12 books, 9,896 lines – and for every page in the edition he could indicate which line was the first and which the last. We underestimate the power of human memory.

So it’s not surprising that in that place where Jesus uttered these phenomenal words at least one person present remembered them. I can imagine that where we have new paragraphs in our printed Bible, the first utterance would be the hook to remembering the rest of that paragraph. So we start with John 14:1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

There is so much going on in our world that causes us pain, anguish and questioning, whether it’s the nightmare that is Syria, the kidnapping in Nigeria, the mining disaster in Turkey, or any one of the many dire situations we bring to God in our intercessions. I don’t know, any more than anyone else, why these things happen – but here is Jesus, himself about to face a horrifying death, reassuring his followers (who themselves would face many trials and dangers in time to come).

“Believe in God, believe also in me.” Who does he think he is? – that’s the question people were asking. It’s the sort of statement that got him into trouble with the religious authorities. In this whole passage, Jesus is calmly putting himself on the same level as God! This man, walking about, eating and drinking, doing everything that we humans do, claims to be the revelation, the image of God: John 14:7 “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him….Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

I was struck by Philip’s request: “Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” I wonder what he had in mind! In OT times, there was the belief that no one could survive the experience of a vision of God, but the whole thrust of John’s Gospel is that God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ: as it says in the opening chapter, John 1:18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,
who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. That’s a lovely description, isn’t it? - close to the Father’s heart. Perhaps it appealed particularly to John, ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, the one who leaned close to Jesus’s heart at the Last Supper.

These affirmations were made before Jesus’s death and resurrection. We now read them in the light of that unique and world-changing event. That’s another ‘bottom line’ for Christians, isn’t it? As the apostle Paul put it: 1 Corinthians 15:14 if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. The fact of Christ’s resurrection validates this and all the other testimony to Jesus in the Gospels. To quote Paul again: 1 Corinthians 15:20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. There is no suggestion that the resurrection is a metaphor or image for anything else: it’s hard fact. Paul and the other apostles and disciples spent the rest of their lives working out the implications of that fact.

And so it is for us. As we meditate on the astounding affirmation: Christ is risen! we are led to think about what difference it makes to us to be ‘Christian’ – that nickname from the early days that has stuck.

As we know, there has been debate on David Cameron’s statement that Britain is a ‘Christian country’, but think what a difference it makes to receive today’s Gospel passage and live our life in the light of it. Jesus assures us that, whatever happens in our life, whatever the future holds, we will be at home with God; we are part of God’s household; God, as it were, shares his home-life with us.

Just as Philip’s naïve request led to a profound revelation of the relationship between Father and Son in the Godhead, so Thomas’s plaintive question “How can we know the way?” also elicits a startling pronouncement: John 14:6-7 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

People have questioned and debated the meaning of No one comes to the Father except through me in the light of other religions and belief-systems, but what Jesus seems to be saying is that he is not pointing to a body of teaching nor a statutory set of practices, such as the Law of Moses, but to a personal encounter. He is not identifying himself as just a teacher or a prophet but as the unique one in whom the essence of God is revealed. So living as a follower of Jesus, a Christian, is not so much studying and obeying a text or message as walking alongside Jesus, rather like the apprentice system where you spend time observing the master, the expert, in action – just as Jesus called people to come and be with him.

Of course, we can’t follow Jesus around as his apprentices in the same way as Thomas, Philip and the other disciples then. But just the risen Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples gathered together in the locked room of a house, so we need to spend time together (as we are doing now) to allow Jesus to reveal himself among us. Because we are not living in Gospel times, we need – despite what I said just now – to spend time, together as well as on our own, absorbing what the testimony of the Holy Scriptures reveals to us about Christ, about God. And we need to take time to do these things: it’s not a rushed job! This is all part of our apprenticeship, which enables us to fulfil what Jesus – towards the end of our Gospel passage – promised would happen.

John 14:12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. Another startling statement, that begs the question, In what sense will we do greater works? I mean, I haven’t yet managed to turn water into wine or walk on water – how about you? Well, we have the record of 2000 years of Christian era history to give
us some perspective on what other Christians living before us have experienced and achieved during their lifetime’s apprenticeship of walking with Jesus. But here we are, here and now. Where will our apprenticeship with Jesus take us?

We have been thinking recently, both as a Cathedral and city community, about where we go with the ‘peace and reconciliation’ branding (if you’ll pardon the use of that objectionable term as an abbreviation). The ‘blitz experience’ is fading from living memory, but as we consider the world as it is today we see that there are opportunities for ‘greater works’ in the area of peace and reconciliation. This may well be Coventry’s special take on the ‘mighty acts’ that we are called upon to proclaim in our first reading from 1 Peter: 1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

We have to be in our Cathedral community what we proclaim to the world outside: we have to be at peace and be reconciled amongst ourselves, otherwise people will not receive our message – quite understandably. Hence the practical teaching of 1 Peter: 1 Peter 2:1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. We are to be ‘living stones’ (sounds like an oxymoron, doesn’t it?) like Jesus, himself pictured as the living ‘chief corner stone’. It’s another image that describes how we need to be with Jesus, close to Jesus’s heart – like the Apostle John. Peter also gives us a childcare image: 1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation. Notice that last expression: grow into salvation. We need patience, understanding and compassion with ourselves and others in our community. We grow at different rates; what matters is that we do grow in our life together as a Christian community, so that we develop the wisdom and maturity that will help us encourage others to discover the joy of living in the presence of the one who reassures us: John 14:3 I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.