Like many of us, I’ve fallen in love… with a hymn; so much so that I’ve decreed it should be sung at my funeral. It’s by John Mason and I’ve been given the pleasure of having it in today’s service. “Thou art a sea without a shore … a sun without a sphere, thy time is now and evermore, thy place is everywhere.” Those particular words, from verse three, feature in the painting that lies at the heart of my exhibition in the St Edmund Chapel and that appears in my publicity. I’ve called the picture ‘Homage to John Mason’ and like Mason’s great hymn that begins with a question, my picture raises questions as to how we see God. The poet and hymn-writer begs us see Him in a different light, crossing contexts and pulling us out into the unimaginable. But I sense it’s the job of all creative minds to attempt to stretch the limits we place upon our imaginations. As a painter who is also a priest, I try to hang onto the truth that art can be more than a view. Like poetry, Art is also a language, albeit a visual one, that demands learning and questioning and doubting, fostering the courage to deliberately make oneself very vulnerable. It can also become a vehicle for exploring connections which, for me is as much about biblical ones as geographical ones. Questions and connections.

Our first bible reading today invited us to connect with the story of a man who asked urgent questions of his Maker and Defender after life had been stripped and turned upside down. You might forgive him for feeling disconnected, except he persists in holding on to God while wrestling with his own conscience. Part of the story gives us answers from his advisors, that fail to stack up and it isn’t until the end of the story, when God asks Job the questions, that Job begins to make proper sense of life once more. There is a fresh perspective, in the way a picture gives us a new handle on things, be it a just a view or something deeper that resonates with us. Sometimes that means that the artist has to break with convention, which is what I had to do with my ‘Homage to John Mason’ picture, in order to suggest that there are ways of our joining in the work of worship that brings earth and heaven together. Heaven is also the subject matter of today’s gospel, yet another question; except that this was an antagonistic question directed at someone believed to be stupid: a stupid question for a man out of his mind, they thought. Except that they are dealing with the most creative mind that has ever lived. Jesus gives them a picture of heaven that stretches their assumptions, says “stop playing with me, for I am the One who releases heaven from being bound by time or human law”. There are to be no limits to heaven, any more than there can be limits to the work of our Creator.

It seems to me that what John Mason has spelt out in his three verses and I have tried to capture in at least one of my twelve paintings, is that despite being invisible and even largely inexpressible, beyond our sight are the unimaginable forces through which God remains at work. And then, because Mason understands worship as work, the gathering up of all aspects of the visible and earthly in order to have heaven mirrored here, you’ll see that my Homage Painting also contains a
summary of the forces that define our world: of polar ice and tropic heat, jungle and desert, harvests, wind and rain, the world turning and new life emerging.

Which is why it’s so nice to have Thomas and his family here, a symbol for all that I’ve been trying to put my finger on: that sense of continuity of life which brings us the wonderful potential of a new life that also shows us the life of God. Thomas’ baptism provides another deep sense of connection, one which will outlive all paintings and poems and music and even this fine Cathedral, because it’s an everlasting bond: “How great a Being Lord is thine, which doth all beings keep!” muses John Mason. So, God will keep the baptised Thomas in his sight, or His shadow, or in His hand – there are lots of highly symbolic pictures that express that truth, of Thomas and the loving capacity of Christ holding him in a permanent and eternal relationship. But I also want to flag up Thomas’ name sake for a moment, the disciple and saint who shows me that doubting is an essential stream to really creative and exciting discipleship. Had he lived in an age other than 1st century Galilee, he might well have been an artist or a poet or composer, because what they all have to grapple with are ways of expressing that which never existed before, risking searching for the truth and exposing their own vulnerability. St Thomas’s desire to see and touch the Risen Christ speaks to me of someone who because he pushed himself towards the limits of his understanding, pushes me to work harder at my understanding, of making something significant from what might appear as slithers of landscape or coastline, bits of my garden back in Fressingfield. Something extraordinary from the ordinary.

Connection and Questions. So I would say to little Thomas today, may you live up to your namesake!

It’s a huge privilege to have the gift of holding an Exhibition in our Cathedral, one I’ve described as a Chapel of Paintings within a Chapel. So I hope you will come and look, ponder a while, read the poems, reflections and share my prayers as well as enjoy the pictures, discovering my answers and connections to questions raised by the many sources of inspiration I’ve found. However, the really big challenge of leaving a Gallery or indeed an act of worship is always far more personal than someone else’s expression. It’s to do with being prepared to ask questions of yourself, for which, what we are to receive at the altar, will point us in the right direction!

And so to God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and all His holy angels be ascribed all honour and power, glory and might, now and for ever. Amen.