The gift of God is eternally given; given in everything and everyone that surrounds and sustains us. Given as friends, given as the eco-system in which we dwell, given in the very oxygen we breathe. And given endlessly; new every morning as the author of the *Book of Lamentations* puts it. And it’s an interesting way in which it is put, because it *is* new every morning, but it’s also new every noonday, every midday, every dusk, every nighttime – as well as every dawn. God’s eternal grace, God’s love and mercy towards us, is continually poured out in every ‘now’. It is continually new. And that is hard to describe. And it is even harder to perceive. It’s like St. Paul’s encouragement to pray at all times, to pray continually. How is this possible – even for the most devout, even for the Augustine friars who built this priory or the Anglo-Saxon nuns who lived here before them?

As human creatures we are bound: by time, by place, by circumstance. God is not; and neither is the grace of God. For this grace is a giving of God’s very eternal self to all that is created. There is no time, no place or any circumstance in which the presence of God is not already there – saturating it. So the author of the *Book of Lamentations* uses some temporal word we are all familiar with – ‘morning’ – because that’s when most of us get up. Some of us take longer than others to arrive at ‘being awake’. I’m not going to divulge my own routine; only to say it involves two cups of coffee and a lot of ‘do not disturb’ messages delivered semi-consciously. A ‘rude awakening’ can be very rude indeed and provoke an equally rude response.

Why am I saying this? Because we can get misled sometimes by the way the writers of the Bible have to put things in order to get us to understand. Stories, narrative, plots are all time-bound and place-bound: this happens here and then that happens there and then this happens here…and so on. So it can seem from reading the Scriptures as though God comes slicing down into time at arbitrary moments, when God decides on a whim, and
then disappears off stage. So God can start to get understood as some cosmic, all-powerful, absentee time-lord. One more character, albeit a formidably great one in the human tellings of our histories. And that can’t be. Not if God is God – eternal, omni-temporal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. That has to be just the way we see things or the way writers like the author of the Book of Lamentations or Luke’s Gospel has to put it – that the operations of God in the world, which are continuous, might be comprehended.

So I hope it’s quite clear that when Philip in John’s Gospel tells Jesus to “show us the father, and that will be enough for us” that he is asking for the impossible. God is the eternal Father only in relation to God being the eternal Son and God being the eternal Holy Spirit. Not only is that going to be impossible to present and to perceive as such by Philip and the other disciples, it shows Philip is misled by the very words he uses and has a very warped understanding of what God the Father is. Quite rightly Jesus can only say to him: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you.”

So, this morning we have the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This may indeed refer to the name of a town known to the Roman historian Josephus as Emmaus Nicopolis, but holding on to the history of these things, like holding on to the historical Jesus, has to be light touch. After the resurrection, time and place are no longer the same boundaries to Jesus the Christ. But the post-resurrection appearances can seem, again, like arbitrary visitations of someone who pops up in the upper room and then in Galilee and then on this road to Emmaus.

And when we start thinking in these time and place terms then the question arises as to what Jesus Christ was doing when he wasn’t appearing here. Where did he disappear to? That is: we start treating the risen Christ like some haunting. That is not Christ as God. As the risen Christ tells the disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: I am with you always, even to the end of time. I am, that’s the message. The presence of God never left creation; it was and is and will be forever enfolded in God’s love, mercy and operative grace.

If the story of the two people on the road to Emmaus tells us anything it’s that we human beings, limited by our very creaturely capacities, and screwed up through sin, don’t see things very well. After the event, Cleopas and the other disciple can reflect: “Were our hearts not burning within us?” all the time the Christ was speaking to them. They are affected by Christ’s presence; they register and experience it. But they can’t
make the connections because they don’t make much sense – they have seen the Christ crucified. Things don’t fall into place until the moment of recognition when the bread is broken. And then Jesus Christ disappears.

Of course, this story, like the story we had read from *Nehemiah*, emphasises the reading of Scripture as a way in which we are made open or open ourselves to God’s presence. And the Emmaus story adds to the reading of Scripture the Eucharist in which Christ is given to us in the breaking of the bread. But reading Scripture and attending Holy Communion are still events bound by time and place. And as I said: God’s grace is continually available. God’s presence is not bound by time and space. Not even bound to the church. Nevertheless, God fittingly accommodates Godself to time and place – the coming of Christ into the world as a human being makes that clear to us. But God is with us in everything we are and do, as God is in all things, through all things and above all thing. That’s St. Paul. So we must not limit either our understandings of God or the operations of God’s grace. We can perceive God in anything and everything if we entrust ourselves, and our sensory perceptions, to God. Then our senses are awakened and our hearts too can burn within us. Even in the little bursts of everyday beauty.

Sunlight pours through the early leaves of a lilac tree turning them into pale green flames. And at the age of 9 the poet and painter William Blake saw such "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars."