What is God really like?

According to BBC Bitesize (GCSE level), God is omnipotent, omnipresent, omnibenevolent and omniscient. Can you explain these terms? How helpful is it to use language like this to describe God? Do you feel that these four terms adequately encapsulate the essential characteristics of God, or do they miss the mark in some way?

The ESV translates the start of 1 John 3:1 as, ‘See what kind of love the Father has given to us…’ OK – how would you describe God’s love for you? When and how and why do you know or feel that God loves you? According to Georg Strecker, the opening imperative ‘See’ does not call us to theoretical knowledge or to sense apprehension, or to focus our attention; he suggests that the call to ‘see’ implies the admonition to entrust ourselves unconditionally to God’s love. Not an easy thing to do! Have there been times when you have been able to entrust yourself to God in this way? What helped you to take that step or brought you to that point? What are the barriers to entrusting ourselves so completely to God?

All the vocabulary we use to refer to God is metaphorical: we seek pictures, symbols and analogies from our own experience to try and express what God is like. How helpful do you find it to think of God as ‘Father’? The image of being a child of God suggests being secure in the love and under the protection of a devoted parent. Can you relate to this idea of being a ‘child of God’ or does this image connect with you in other ways? Are there other metaphors or images of God that you find more helpful? If so, what are they and what do they convey to you about what God is like?

Looking at 1 John 3:1-7, what qualities are ascribed to God in this passage? What evidence can you point to, from your own experience of life or the world, or from the Bible, that these characteristics are true of God? Are there other attributes of God that you would want to say are really important? Again, how do we know that this is what God is really like? Do these qualities of God make you want to worship him? If they do, then go for it!

You may be familiar with the story of the little girl in Sunday School who told her teacher that she was drawing a picture of God. ‘No one knows what God looks like,’ the teacher told her. ‘They will when I’ve finished!’ was the girl’s reply. John 1:18 says, ‘No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who was at the Father’s side, has made him known.’ Jesus reveals God to us in a way that nobody, and nothing else can. What kind of God do we see in and through Jesus?

Jesus does not just show us what God is like. 1 John 3:5 says that he appeared to take away our sins. John seems to expect that this removal of sin from our lives will have an impact on how we live. What changes does he expect? There is material in this passage which suggests that these changes don’t take place automatically. What part are we expected to play in bringing these changes about? Have you seen changes in your own life as a result of being a Christian? Are there ways in which you have become more like God? How have these changes taken place?

Look at the tenses of the verbs in the passage. What has happened in the past, and how does this provide a basis for what happens now and for what will happen in the future? There are a couple of references in the passage to seeing God (3:2; 3:6): when and how does seeing God make a difference to us? When and how do we ‘see God’ today?

Although Christ has taken away our sins, sin can be a bit like mould in a damp house – even after you have cleaned and redecorated, it still has a lingering tendency to creep back in. But Jesus does not give up on us. Even after we have handed control of our lives over to him, he remains committed to removing sin from our lives whenever and wherever he finds it (and he does – in all of us!). But the fact that sin can keep on cropping up as an unwelcome presence in our lives does not mean that we should get used to living with it. If there is sin in your life which should not be there, now is the time to ask Jesus to take it away. And he will – gladly, and free of charge.

‘O Lord, forgive what I have been, sanctify what I am, and order what I shall be. Amen.’