Who is Jesus for you?
All sorts of people have answered that question.
For Fidel Castro (Marxist-Leninist father of the Cuban revolution) Jesus was the ultimate champion of the downtrodden: ‘To betray the poor is to betray Christ.’
Elvis Presley confessed, ‘I’m not the King. Jesus Christ is the King. I’m just an entertainer.’
Even John Lennon (his voice newly restored to us through AI), he who once said that the Beatles were ‘more popular than Jesus’, conceded that Jesus was ‘all right’, though his disciples were ‘thick and ordinary’.
The 1990s saw young Christians in the US answer the question with fashion accessories, wearing bracelets inscribed WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? – to testify that Jesus was their guide in life’s choices.
This was mocked by some superior Christians, but WWJD is a pretty good question to ask if you want to avoid some of our sillier or more destructive behaviours. Sometimes, though, What Jesus Actually Does can come as a surprise.
Addressing the vigil after the evil attacks in Nottingham last week, the leader of the university chaplaincy told the crowd that he and his colleagues stood ready to help. His compassion was evident, and he made no distinctions of race, culture or belief.
What would Jesus do in that situation? Just that, surely: show unconditional compassion. Well, this morning’s gospel passage may, then, come as a shock.
Jesus also sees a crowd, and he feels compassion because they are ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’. He sends his team of disciples out to help. But not to help everyone. Jesus tells them
Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
Why? Don’t Samaritans need help? Don’t Gentiles have a place in the Kingdom of Heaven? Does that sound like who Jesus is for you?

Now, the fact that we are here, most of us not of Jewish descent, shows that Jesus’ movement did reach the gentiles – at the end of his gospel, Matthew will describe the risen Jesus sending his disciples to all the nations – but what did Jesus think back in Galilee?

Did he see a mission to the Gentiles as part of the plan, but not yet? Did he reckon that going to the pagan Gentiles (as well as the heretic Samaritans) straightaway would discredit him with his fellow Jews? Or would the very idea of a ministry to the gentiles have come as a surprise? I suspect they were part of his plan from the start, but this restriction still comes with a jolt. Mark and Luke in their gospels leave it out.

Now that’s all very interesting, if you’re interested in that sort of thing – but also if you aren’t. To be a Christian is to say (with Elvis) that Jesus is King, to give him authority in your life.

For us here, it means being drawn not just by this gorgeous building, or the beautiful music, or our excellent schools. These are all part of it, but it’s Jesus that should make the big difference. It matters, then, what picture of Jesus you work with – hence my question, who is Jesus for you?

Down the centuries there have been so many different answers to that question: Jesus the overthrower of authority, and Jesus who blesses kings and empires; Jesus the friend of the powerless and Jesus the endorser of the powerful; Jesus the friend of sinners and Jesus the moralising judge. Different people have identified Jesus with their – very different – causes. And we can add to the list.

Richard Dawkins said that ‘someone as intelligent as Jesus would have been an atheist if he had known what we know today’. And as we approached the first pandemic Christmas, former PM (and now former MP) Boris Johnson invoked Jesus as pro-vaccine. Let’s get jabbed, he said, not just for ourselves, but for friends and family and everyone we meet...That, after all, is the teaching of Jesus Christ, whose
birth is at the heart of this enormous festival, that we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves.
Now it is impressive that everybody wants Jesus on their team – even someone who wants to rubbish Christianity itself – and, as it happens, I think vaccination is a legitimate extension of Jesus’ teaching, but we should be cautious about claiming Jesus’ support for everything that you or I think is right and good. There have been so many Jesuses, yet there was only ever one Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Galilee; and he was not always as we might expect.
Who is Jesus for me? I have to find some answer to that question, one that speaks to who I am – my personality, background and needs – without turning Jesus into a puppet. Matthew today lists Jesus’ disciples – and we must add to them the women who were part of Jesus’ movement. John Lennon may have thought them thick and ordinary, but each found something in Jesus that made all the difference for them. Their impressions of him were also refracted thought their personalities, backgrounds and needs, which is why our Bible has not one gospel portrait of Jesus but four. ‘Who is Jesus for me?’ was a question they had to answer too.
So what do we do? If all this is to mean anything, Jesus cannot just be a mascot for whatever we already are. Jesus should make a difference to how we act, as family members, neighbours, as workers, as spenders, savers, as voters. But what difference?
As we look at our world, the WWJD question can be hard to answer.
If he were preaching today, would Jesus use TikTok? What line would he take on AI, or vaping, or strikes, or boats in the channel? How hard would want us to go to keep global warming below 2°C? Would he take away Mr Johnson’s parliamentary pass? You have your ideas, I have mine, and they won’t all be the same. Jesus makes a difference, then, not by giving a single ‘Christian’ answer to each problem, but by nurturing a Christian instinct in approaching them. We glimpse signs of it in today’s gospel. First, evident compassion – which we feed not so much by worrying about the state of the world as by praying for its people and creatures.
Secondly, being awake to anything that is self-serving. Notice how Jesus tells the disciples not to accept payment: they are to avoid any suspicion that they are on the make, or that this is about them.

Thirdly, a willingness to be surprised, even unsettled. Flip though Matthew’s gospel and you will see how often what Jesus does takes them by surprise.

As I speak and as you listen (if you are) millions are spending their Sunday morning indulging in confirmation bias: reading, watching, listening to people who stroke their existing beliefs and opinions. Here, we choose to be in the not-always-comfortable presence of Jesus. Here (as one writer puts it) we let ourselves be disturbed and moved by him in his own setting, with all its alienness and its power to change our appreciation of our own lives. (Lesley Houlden)

Disturbed and moved. Comforted too, I hope – but not stroked. And if we approach the things we have to do with the gifts he wants to gives us – a heart of compassion, a nose for self-centredness, hands open (like Abraham’s and Sarah’s in our first reading) to the surprises of God’s grace – then we may learn better who Jesus is for us.