

Shall I scare you this morning? Shake you out of your third Sunday of Lent torpor? Ask you a question and make you respond? Grab Kurt's microphone and before you can hit the exits go from pew to pew demanding an answer? I bet the baptism guests are beginning to regret accepting the invitation. You could have been having a lie in! You could have been in front of the box killing some brain cells! Instead, here you are about to be humiliated in public.

I'll let you off this time, that's the kind of nice guy I am. But that still leaves us with a question. Here's it is.

What do you think God is like? Lest we slip into old guy in the sky with beard (you know, Lucy in the sky with diamonds the morning after the 60s ended) let's head to the big book and see what's the Bible can tell us about the boss man.

So. What do you think God is like. Let's start, as our faith does, with the Hebrew Scriptures. There we can read God described as being like...

A jealous husband. An angry father. A burning bush. A rock. Thundering clouds. A mountain. A mother bear. A really bad hallucination. A potter. A fortress. A shield. The sun.

Something of a mixed bag there. I know for many, and understandably, talk of God the Father can be unhelpfully patriarchal, but that's nothing compared to the problems of God the flaming shrubbery.

If we skip along to the New Testament where we meet him incarnate, we find God described as:

A vine. A shepherd. A sheepfold. The first and last letters of the alphabet. The way. A judge. A teacher. Light. Love. Bread. Wind. Breath. A rock that moves around following people (thank you St Paul). A mother hen.

Quite a mishmash of metaphors there as well, some helpful some, well, less so, but it's God we're trying to talk about so it's no surprise we're reaching for the analogies because we can only ever say God is *like* this or *like* that because God is by his very nature ineffable and indescribable.

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD... as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Imagine a mouse trying to describe your personality to another mouse. Even if you've as little charisma as Dominic Raab, they're gonna find it impossible. Then multiply that impossibility an infinite number of times, and you'll see the sort of problem we've got. Or at least the problem you've got if you think too much.

Our considerable population of church mice notwithstanding (they're here but not listening to this), we are not mice but humans and if there's one thing we think we understand well it's, well, ourselves, and so as Christians we can sort of swerve around the difficulty of God's ineffable unknowability because he chose to come to us in the way we can best understand: another human being. If someone asks you what your husband is like, or your girlfriend or your Rector, or indeed anyone else you know, you won't have to go away and take some time to think before you answer.

So we can ask the question, 'What sort of person do we think Jesus is?'

This is a crucial question, because as Christians, we are trying to be like that person we think Jesus is; when we are baptised, we become in some rather mystical way, part of that person. So what we think Jesus is like is an important question.

Finding out what another person is like is not entirely a straightforward matter. Ask different people, you'll get slightly different views, this aspect highlighted in one, this trait emphasised in another, this person will mention something nobody else has. Welcome to the four gospels.

To really get a grip on what a person is like you'll need to see the eulogy for their funeral. Because for very understandable reasons, eulogies almost always concentrate on the departed's best sides and their better natures, and that's not because a person dying makes you think that they were without flaws, but because a loved one's death makes you concentrate on what most important about them, which in a nutshell is the person they *actually* were. You put aside the moments when they were tetchy, selfish, grumpy; when they forgot something important or didn't want to listen or didn't have the time. Because that's just the ups and downs of life. Better to remember instead the best stuff, because our best self is our truest self. They were kind. They were helpful. They loved their family. They were, and they did, that's who they were.

So, what sort of person do you think Jesus actually is?

The gospels present us with a cascade of cameos, as they show us Jesus respond to situations, answer questions, meet people, teach. This is helpful but we can't get bogged down on too small detail— one event on one day say—, because we might be looking at something peculiar to a time and a place: we want to look in the round at the kaleidoscope of impressions and then ask, what sort of person do we think Jesus is?

The bigger picture is crucial- because the details might mislead.

For example, the gospels are very clear that Jesus disapproves of divorce and remarriage. And yet before we run off and start casting people into the outer darkness when their marriage breaks down we need to ask... What sort of person do we think Jesus is? What we you think his response to an *actual* marriage breakdown would be? Some of us here will have been through it. Do we imagine Jesus tutting at us, moving to the other side of the street when we pass by, making us sit at the back in church, barring us from certain jobs (welcome to the Church of England)? Do we?

What was Jesus teaching about? Ultra-legalism, law for the sake of law, condemning people to a lifetime of unhappiness because they made the wrong decision in a flushed folly of youth, forcing people to stay with an abusive spouse? Is that the sort of person do we think Jesus is?

Divorce is not a good thing. That's what Jesus teaching says. Saying something is not good is not the same the same as condemning those who do it. Nobody thinks divorce is a good thing, but it can quite often be the least bad thing two people can do.

What sort of person do you think Jesus is?

Judgemental, legalistic and condemning? Or compassionate and understanding?

You know, I know, otherwise we most likely wouldn't be here, that the answer is compassionate and understanding.

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*

Jesus easily forgives others. Before he knows what they have done, before he shows any interest in other aspects of their life, whatever they have done, he forgives. In that lovely gospel tale where it's so crowded round Jesus that the only way to get a sick person to him is to remove the tiles and lower them through the roof, the very first thing Jesus does is says to the guy whose been lowered into his presence is 'your sins are forgiven'. What a great thing to say. 'I accept you'. Before the guy even opens his mouth. The woman caught in adultery, Zaccheus in the sycamore tree. Jesus meets, welcomes, forgives. He runs out to greet the prodigal son, leaves the ninety-nine sheep on the hillside to search for the one who strayed. Because he knows all about the ups and downs of life, and he knows that our best self is our truest self.

Jesus is not legalistic, condemning and judgemental, but he will be our judge. Compassionate and understanding: we know what he's really like. And, luckily for us, he knows what we're really like, he knows our truest self, our best self.