

# Stories

FOR INTERACTIVE ASSEMBLIES

15 story-based assemblies to get children talking

NIGEL BISHOP



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# Foreword

Using the storytelling style of Jesus, Nigel Bishop has created stories firmly rooted in the experiences of the intended audience. Instead of a farmer's field or the road to Jericho, a school classroom or hall provides the backdrop for these thought-provoking parables. The immediate connection to the child's world will not fail to engage the listener and bring the stories to life. The stories, followed by the suggested questions, will open minds and enable pupils to explore the messages and metaphors hidden within the parables.

The stories are of infinitely more worth because no explanation of possible meaning has been given. Therefore, the children are encouraged to interpret and discover for themselves how the stories relate to their lives, values, behaviour and relationships. These thought processes will enrich and illuminate their own spiritual journeys.

These stories will appeal to children from all faiths and cultural backgrounds and could be used in primary schools throughout the country. As Nigel suggests in his introduction, telling the stories rather than reading them would make a greater impact. So I would like to encourage you to 'go for it' and perhaps dare to make slight adjustments, making the stories more relevant to your pupils.

Nigel Bishop has clearly used his wide range of teaching and preaching experiences to fulfil his intention of providing a resource that will open up the Gospel parables to new audiences while remaining true to their original author.

*Lisa Fenton, Senior Adviser to Schools, Blackburn Diocese*

# Introduction

The stories that Jesus told to convey so much of his teaching to a variety of audiences are known as ‘parables’, and they were a narrative form used by many rabbis, or Jewish teachers, of his day. There has been a great deal of debate over the years about just how the parables should be interpreted. Parables can be riddles, illustrative stories, proverbs, allegories, extended metaphors and similitudes (for example, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like this...’).

Parables have been described as ‘earthly stories with a heavenly meaning’, but it is clear that Jesus used them to communicate what he considered to be great truths about his vision for a new society as well as his ideas on spirituality. They share the good news, or ‘gospel’, of God’s inclusive love and sovereign generosity; they describe the nature of the kingdom of God, how it comes and how it grows; they define the qualities looked for in the people of this new society, and they allude to the purpose of Jesus’ own life and death.

As a means of teaching, the parables have a number of characteristics going for them. These stories, set in contexts easily accessible to those who hear them, are vivid, challenging and memorable. Jesus taught a variety of audiences, divided loosely into three groups: his disciples (or chosen close friends), his enemies (usually the ultra-religious people of his day, the scribes and Pharisees) and the crowds of ordinary people who flocked to hear him preach. It was for this last group that the parables were most often employed, according to the Gospel narratives. The attraction of the parabolic form lies in the apparent clarity of the story (although at times this includes an inherent strangeness or unexpected twist), coupled with a tendency to provoke further reflection and appropriate action in the listener. As C.H. Dodd put it, a parable ‘leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its

application to tease it into active thought'. In similar vein, P.G. Wodehouse explained that a parable 'kept something up its sleeve' which was capable of striking its hearer later.

From the time of the early Church through to the 19th century, the parables of Jesus were treated by most scholars as complete allegories. Detailed and dogmatic spiritual interpretations were attached to every aspect of a story, leaving almost no room for interpretation by the listener or reader. Presumably if you weren't 'in the know' about these conventions you were missing out on the 'truths' shared by the initiated. In this way, an originally inclusive and creative piece of storytelling became exclusive and narrow. It is generally felt that the parables are the most accurately recorded aspects of Jesus' teaching, apart from some interpretation that appears to have been added. The only real claim that they might have been stories containing truths intended only for the chosen few comes in Mark 4:10–12 (reworked in Matthew and Luke), although this may well be a personal theory of the Gospel writer. Certainly the nature of the parables and the way in which they were told suggest an attempt by Jesus to reach as wide an audience as possible with his groundbreaking teaching.

Consequently, the modern trend has been to view the parables less as allegories and more as illustrative stories containing a limited number of parallels with spiritual or societal truths. For example, a parable like 'The prodigal son' speaks of the forgiving love of God, but also has a great deal to say about the nature of jealousy, as exemplified by the older brother's reaction to what might otherwise have been good news. During the 20th century, biblical scholars have opened up our interpretation of the parables, and in the postmodern age we are increasingly likely to view these stories as instruments through which their original author can reach directly into the minds of those who hear them, providing almost as many responses as there are people to respond. Jesus' vision of reality gave rise to the parable narratives, the purpose of which was to produce in his listeners an effect that changed how they thought about the world and lived their lives in it.

As a Methodist preacher and primary school teacher, I have become increasingly convinced that the very essence of these powerful and authentic stories of Jesus is being lost to generations of listeners. This is partly due to our tendency to read rather than tell them in acts of worship or assemblies. More significantly, however, I believe that the obscure contexts in which the parables are set makes them almost impossible for many listeners to engage with. I vividly remember from my childhood a dramatized version of the good Samaritan set in a railway carriage. Suddenly the story came alive for me, because I could relate to the characters and events as being real rather than biblical. This was a story about life as I knew it, rather than life in some distant time and country. It was connected to my own experiences, my own hopes and fears, rather than being the stuff of slides of the Holy Land and Sunday school photocopies.

For several years now, I have reworked the parables of Jesus for all-age worship in local Methodist churches and the schools in which I have led assemblies. My intention in this book is to record for you some of the stories I have used. I almost always *tell* the stories (rather than reading them), adapting the names and some of the events to suit the context in which I find myself. I have ‘road tested’ these written accounts with a variety of audiences, and I trust you will feel that they get the point across if you choose to read them out loud. However, I do urge you to throw caution to the winds and *tell* them wherever you can. The details, after all, are not so very important—it’s the central, lifestyle-challenging idea that’s vital.

When I have finished reading or telling one of these stories, I invariably ask, ‘Who told this story first?’ When someone replies ‘Jesus’, I explain that I have changed the setting, but that I hope the meaning has stayed the same. It’s amazing how rapidly heads start bobbing, fingers fiddling and eyes wandering as soon as any attempt at interpretation starts. Following the example of Jesus, the master storyteller, I have found that it is far better just to let the parable speak for itself. I suggest, therefore, that the follow-up work



included in this book would be best used at a later time, perhaps in another place, although I am currently experimenting with short periods of paired talk in my services and assemblies, to enable immediate responses from the listeners.

Some of the stories are not immediately or easily recognizable to those who know the originals. I have located them all either in a primary school setting or one readily recognizable to children of 4–11 years of age. They are intended to be contemporary, although such is the pace of change in education (and society in general) that I am sure they will soon appear dated and you may need to adjust them to keep them fresh for your audience. I have used them in a multi-faith context as part of acts of worship of a 'broadly Christian' nature at school. At the end of each story I have given a biblical text explaining where my inspiration came from, although it is not my intention that readers or listeners would go straight to their Bibles in order to look up the original. This would defeat the purpose of using a contemporary setting to challenge children in a new way. I recommend that the preparation and follow-up activities are completed without reference to the Bible, although of course I would encourage children to look up the texts in an appropriate translation later if they are interested. My main intention, of course, has been to provide a resource which will open up the parables to a new audience, while remaining faithful to the vision of their originator, whose words have proved life-changing to so many for so long.

## THE PARABLES

The titles of the original parables, as shown below, are taken from the Contemporary English Version of the Bible (CEV).

1. A story about three servants: Matthew 25:14–30
2. The good Samaritan: Luke 10:25–37
3. The two builders: Luke 6:46–49
4. The great banquet: Luke 14:15–24

5. Weeds among the wheat: Matthew 13:24–30
6. A story about ten girls: Matthew 25:1–13
7. One sheep: Luke 15:4–7
8. An official who refused to forgive: Matthew 18:21–35
9. Two sons: Luke 15:11–32
10. A story about a farmer: Matthew 13:3–8
11. A Pharisee and a tax collector: Luke 18:9–14
12. A valuable pearl: Matthew 13:45–46
13. A story about two sons: Matthew 21:28–31
14. A hidden treasure: Matthew 13:44
15. Workers in a vineyard: Matthew 20:1–16



# The three monitors

## TARGET

Making the most of talents and abilities

Mr Gallant had to go on a computer course, so he asked for three monitors to meet him in his classroom during lunch time, and left each one a job to do for the supply teacher the following day.

Jonathan was a good reader and meticulously neat, so Mr Gallant asked him to tidy the bookshelf just before home time.

‘Make sure the library books are separate from the reading scheme ones,’ explained Mr Gallant carefully. ‘Oh, and please make sure all the spines are facing outwards as well, so that people can see the titles,’ he added as an afterthought.

Kirsty loved plants and animals—well, anything to do with nature really—so Mr Gallant showed her where the watering can was and took her to each of the plants, telling her how much water they would need.

Matthew, the least reliable of the three monitors, gazed up into Mr Gallant’s face, noticing the thoughtful expression.

‘What on earth can I give him to do?’ wondered the teacher, racking his brains for something useful but not difficult, or delicate, or dangerous. Then it occurred to him. Of course...

‘Matthew,’ he said encouragingly, ‘you can wipe the whiteboard for me.’

Matthew’s face showed no real sign of confidence as he cautiously nodded, but Mr Gallant decided that there was very

little that could possibly go wrong. In fact, he went home that night with a light heart, looking forward to his computer course the next day, and anticipating a pleasant return to school the day after.

Mr Gallant whistled cheerfully to himself as he sauntered across the playground two days later. The car had started first time, he had cheese and pickle sandwiches in his lunchbox and he was looking forward to trying out some of the computer skills he'd learnt on his course—if he could get the machine started, that was.

Jonathan left the football match, which was already in full swing even at ten to nine, and intercepted his teacher just as Mr Gallant's hand was reaching out to open the door into school.

'I did the books,' proclaimed Jonathan with pride. 'I put the spines out, like you said, and I put them in alphabetical order—by author—like they told us that time on our library visit,' he added by way of explanation.

'Well done, Jonathan, you're a complete star,' said Mr Gallant, beaming broadly. 'I knew you'd make a good job, but I didn't imagine you'd do all that. You can be the class librarian every week if you like. Come inside and I'll find you a treat.'

The two of them were about to go inside when Kirsty ran up, her rucksack banging noisily against her back.

'I watered the plants—like you said,' she panted breathlessly. 'I wiped the dust off all the leaves too. And I took the dead leaves out of the pots for you.'

'That's marvellous, Kirsty,' said Mr Gallant approvingly. 'I knew you'd be OK, although I thought the watering would be hard enough. You can be the class gardener from now on. Come inside and I'll find you a treat.'

As they passed through the doorway, Mr Gallant suddenly remembered Matthew. He turned and walked back down the steps on to the playground, searching the mass of bobbing heads for the last monitor. He spotted him in a corner of the

playground, hands in pockets, head down, shoulders hunched. Mr Gallant got the distinct impression that Matthew was avoiding him, so he called his name and beckoned him over with a few rapid movements of his finger.

‘How did you get on yesterday?’ he enquired when the boy eventually reached him.

‘Fine,’ came the reply.

‘Did Mrs Gaynor have any problems with anything? Or anyone?’ asked Mr Gallant pointedly.

‘No,’ replied Matthew with wide, honest eyes.

‘Did you do the board for me?’

No answer—not at first. And then, after careful consideration, Matthew explained sulkily.

‘I knew it wouldn’t be good enough for you. I thought I might smudge the board, or rub off something I shouldn’t, and I didn’t want to get into trouble, so... I left it.’

Matthew looked up uncertainly, waiting to see what would happen.

‘Oh, Matthew,’ said Mr Gallant. ‘You could at least have had a go. You can stay out here on the playground until the bell goes and think about it. I was going to take you in for a treat, but I’ll split it between the other two. They took the opportunities I gave them and did extra work as well.’

But looking at the dispirited boy before him, and thinking for a moment about all the things that might have gone wrong yesterday, Mr Gallant felt he should say a bit more.

‘If you don’t try to do things, you’ll never get anywhere in life. Next time I give you a job, give it a try. I’ll be much happier if you do, and so will you, even if it doesn’t quite work out.’

I wonder if there was a next time. What do you think?

(Find this story as Jesus told it in Matthew 25:14–30.)



## CURRICULUM LINKS

PSHE KS1: 1b share opinions; 1e set goals; 2c recognize choices; 2e responsibilities; 2h contribute to life; 4b work co-operatively; 5a take responsibility; 5b feel positive; 5c discussions.

PSHE KS2: 1a talk and write about opinions; 1b recognize their worth, set personal goals; 1e develop skills; 2d responsibilities and duties; 5a take responsibility; 5b feel positive about themselves; 5f develop relationships.

RE KS1: 1a explore religious stories; 1d religious beliefs in the arts; 2c identify what matters to them and others; 2d reflect on moral values and their own behaviour; 3j belonging; 3k myself; 3p sharing their own beliefs, ideas and values.

RE KS2: 1a describe stories; 1f religious responses to ethical questions; 2c discuss religious belief; 3o discussing religious and philosophical questions; 3p considering experiences and feelings.

## MENTAL SWITCH-ON

How do you feel about doing jobs for teachers? Why do they ask children to do jobs for them? What kinds of children normally get asked to do jobs? Do you need to receive a reward for doing a job around school?

## SO WHAT?

- How do you think each of the children in the story felt about being asked to do something by Mr Gallant?
- What could Matthew have done to get help with his fears about wiping the board properly?

- Can you remember a time when you didn't do something because you were afraid you couldn't do it well enough?
- What do you think you're good at?
- What talents or abilities would you like to use more?
- When might it be OK to make mistakes at school?
- How important is it for people to use the talents they have?
- Which talents are the most useful to other people?
- What does the story say about the way Jesus thought people should behave?

## PRAYER

*Help us to know what we can do,  
help us to practise until we improve,  
and help us to believe we can achieve great things  
for others, for ourselves and for you. Amen*

## POSSIBILITIES

### Visual ideas

Suggest that the children draw pictures or write a list of jobs they've done at school and at home. Next to this, they could add the jobs that they'd like to do. As an extension, the more able could try to identify particular skills or knowledge that they have used in each job. Their identified skills and knowledge could each be accompanied by an icon to help children remember them, and then be displayed on cards to share with the class.

### Auditory ideas

Ask groups of children to act out the last scene of the story, when Mr Gallant walked through the playground.

An extension for the more able might be to write a dialogue between Matthew and one of the other two children during the next playtime. The children could work out an acrostic based on the word TALENTS to share out loud with the rest of the class.

**Kinaesthetic ideas**

Each child writes his or her name on a piece of paper and leaves it on the table where they sit. Everyone then circulates round the room, adding to the sheets the skills and talents that they think other children possess, until every child's paper has at least three. At this point the teacher could gather the children into a circle and ask each child to share what has been written about them. A variation would be for children to read out someone else's list.

Younger or less able children could be given three cards, each preprinted by the teacher with a different skill or talent: for example, helpful, kind, tidy, busy, friendly, funny and so on. The children can then circulate round the room, placing each card under another child's name.

**Tactile ideas**

Ask the children to make a dice using a cube net. They could then write on each face a talent based on a character trait, perhaps read from the board following a class or group discussion. In groups, they could then roll the dice and take it in turns to think of something they have done recently, or could do in the future, which is an example of the talent shown.

**Group ideas**

Give each child their name on a card, and ask them to put it somewhere in the class to show a job they have done or a job they would like to do. They could discuss together what training they would need to tackle some of the harder jobs.

The whole class could sit in a circle and, while the teacher holds up each card in turn, the children could take it in turns to call out that person's talents.

Organize the children to work in groups to produce a fund-raising idea for a charity of their choice, drawing on ideas and skills within the group or class. Small groups of children could draw up a rota for class jobs and then put their names on it using sticky notes.





# The class pain

## TARGET

Avoiding prejudice

Pritveh was taking the register. Finally he'd been chosen. He couldn't believe it—the number of times he'd put his hand up and been overlooked by Miss Stamp. Now his moment had come and he was determined to enjoy the freedom and excitement of walking the whole length of the school.

However, it wasn't long before he started to have second thoughts. He was only in Year Three, and it seemed a shame that the teachers had all been told to send only one person to the office on any errand. He had to pass the Year Six cloakrooms, and now the stories he'd heard of all the horrible things that could happen to you there came flooding back into his mind. Pritveh stopped, took a deep breath, lowered his head and almost ran down the corridor past the coats and bags that crowded the pegs on both walls.

It was as he first detected the smell of the boys' toilets in his fear-widened nostrils that Pritveh ran smack into the very solid form of Wayne Nelson. The register and dinner money tin clattered to the floor, and as the Year Three stooped to pick them up a trainer clumped down on top of each of them. The trainers were not the same—one was white and the other red, and neither of them belonged to Wayne. As Pritveh looked up terrified from his kneeling position, he found himself

surrounded by three boys, their manner intimidating and their faces uncompromising. Miss Stamp's safe, warm classroom seemed a million miles away.

'What have we got here?' sneered one of the boys. He was smaller than Pritveh, but he had a mean, nasty expression on his narrow face that spoke of imminent unpleasantness. Pritveh didn't know his name, but he'd met him before on the playground.

'You've dropped the register,' joined in his sidekick, another boy whose name Pritveh didn't know, although his ugly, fat face and matching body were instantly recognizable. 'It might get all messed up on the floor there, and then you'd get into big trouble at the office, wouldn't you?' he continued, menacingly.

'Unless, of course, you gave us your tuck money.' This suggestion came from Wayne himself, the toughest boy in the school. Even the teachers seemed to be scared of him sometimes. He switched on a grin, one full of menace but tinged with obvious enjoyment. Pritveh thrust his right hand quickly into his pocket, pulled out the 50 pence coin with trembling, moist fingers and cautiously held it out towards Wayne. Fat Face grabbed it, crushing the delicate brown fingers as he did so, while Narrow Face delivered a punch and a kick that drew tears instantly to Pritveh's eyes, as well as doubling him over in mouth-twisting pain on to the tiled floor, where he lay in a sobbing ball. Pritveh's mind was spinning with a mixture of fear, hurt and anger. He clutched his head, as if he could hug the feelings away, and wriggled into the cover of the coats on the right-hand side of the corridor.

If Pritveh had looked around at this point, he would have been surprised by the speed with which the three Year Sixes had disappeared. He would also have been very relieved. But right now he didn't look. He didn't listen. He just crouched there, sniffing and shaking miserably, his big trip completely spoiled.

Lauren was on the way to the hall when she saw him. She had been chosen to read the story in assembly today and had been

told that she could go and practise for two minutes. She didn't know the boy, although she knew he was younger than her, but she told herself she hadn't time to stop and hurried past on the left-hand side of the corridor so as not to disturb him.

David was also on the way to the hall. He had the important job of setting up the digital projector and he was proud of the fact that he hadn't missed a single assembly all year. When he saw Pritveh, he had a sudden recollection of being in a similar place when he was that age. He looked swiftly and fearfully around him, realized that there was no threat, but nevertheless tiptoed carefully past the huddled, crying boy. Once past, he speeded up again, his mind set on the task ahead.

Samantha was on her way to see the school nurse. It seemed as though she was always going to see her for one thing or another. The other kids often whispered about her, their hands in front of their mouths while their eyes, full of contempt, stabbed across the room into hers. Everyone in Year Five said she was a pain. She could tell that the teachers thought it sometimes too, although they never actually said so. Everyone knew she smelled. That was why everyone avoided her when the class lined up for assembly. At least she would be spared that embarrassment today.

When she came round the corner, she saw Pritveh and felt sorry for him. She could instantly imagine what had happened. She retrieved the register and tin, put her arm around him and led him to the office where Mrs Baxter soon brought the whole story flooding out of him.

'He can have my tuck money, Miss,' offered Samantha, holding out a number of silver coins on a dirt-grimed hand. 'I'll come back after I've seen the nurse if you like. Then I can take him back to class for you.'

Not such a pain after all, then.

(Find this story as Jesus told it in Luke 10:25–37.)



## CURRICULUM LINKS

PSHE KS1: 1a fair and unfair, right and wrong; 1b share opinions; 1c recognize and deal with feelings; 2a discussions; 2c recognize choices, right and wrong; 2e needs and responsibilities; 2h contribute to life; 4b work co-operatively; 4c differences and similarities; 4d friends should care; 4e bullying; 5a take responsibility; 5b feel positive; 5c discussions; 5g moral dilemmas.

PSHE KS2: 1a talk and write about opinions; 1b recognize their worth, set personal goals; 1e develop skills; 2d responsibilities and duties; 2k explore the media; 3e recognize risks; 4a care about others; 4e challenge stereotypes; 4f differences and similarities; 5a take responsibility; 5b feel positive about themselves; 5f develop relationships; 5g moral dilemmas.

RE KS1: 1a explore religious stories; 1d religious beliefs in the arts; 2c identify what matters to them and others; 2d reflect on moral values and their own behaviour; 3j belonging; 3k myself; 3p sharing their own beliefs, ideas and values.

RE KS2: 1a describe stories; 1f religious responses to ethical questions; 2c discuss religious belief; 2d right and wrong; 3f teachings and authority; 3k following a religion or belief; 3m fairness; 3o discussing religious and philosophical questions; 3p considering experiences and feelings.

## MENTAL SWITCH-ON

What might make someone frightened at school? How do you keep safe when there are no adults about? What does it mean to judge someone? Who have you judged recently?

## SO WHAT?

- How did Pritveh's feelings about going to the office change after the older boys had taken his tuck money?
- As they had been given important jobs by teachers, what kind of children do you think Lauren and David were?
- Why didn't they stop to help Pritveh?
- When might it be more important to go and do a job than to stop and help someone in trouble?
- How do you think Samantha felt about her classmates?
- Jesus told the original story to answer a man who asked, 'Who should I care for?' Which child in the story cared for someone?
- Why was Samantha's reaction surprising?
- Why was it important for Pritveh to tell someone what had happened?
- What do you think this story has to say about pre-judging people (or prejudice)?

## PRAYER

*Give us the wisdom to see the good in those around us,  
give us the friendship to help those who need us,  
give us the courage to stand up for those who are alone.  
Amen*

## POSSIBILITIES

### Visual ideas

Ask the children to draw a picture of the faces of the different characters in the story, showing their expressions. An extension for the more able could be to identify pairs of characters whose actions affected the feelings of others: for example, Wayne and Pritveh, Pritveh and Lauren, Samantha and Pritveh. The pupils could write alongside each pair how one affected the other.

Another activity would be to get children to draw a graph of

Pritveh's feelings throughout the story (how happy he is, from 0 to 10). An extension would be to add in other characters—for example, Wayne, Lauren and so on—to see how their emotions were affected by their encounters with Pritveh.

### **Auditory ideas**

Provide a group of children with some percussion instruments and ask them to devise backing sounds to match part, or all, of the story. For younger or less able children, a recording of the text by the teacher could be provided for them to work to, rather than asking one of them to read aloud. A performance could be shared with the rest of the class at the end of the lesson.

### **Kinaesthetic ideas**

On a plan of the school the children could identify areas where children might not feel safe from bullying. This could involve taking turns to tour the school in pairs, with groups getting together to discuss their results. Finally, a plan with 'hotspots' identified could be shared with the rest of the class and perhaps the school council, so that the staff could consider solutions.

### **Tactile ideas**

The children could be given some newspapers and asked to find and cut out photographs of, or stories about, people who are judged by society and can be easily stereotyped (for example, footballers with their bad behaviour). The children could then write or copy words that contrast with our preconceptions on to a collage of the pictures.

### **Group ideas**

Groups of children might each be given a set of cards with the following behaviours on them. They could then try to agree how to place them in order on their table, with the 'worst' at one end and the 'best' at the other:

punching  
helping  
stealing  
kicking  
name calling  
encouraging  
teasing  
sharing  
listening  
provoking  
giving  
ignoring  
laughing  
befriending

Ask groups of children to produce tableaux of each key scene in the story. The rest of the class take it in turns to study each tableau and decide which person is playing each character, based on their pose and facial expression.