

# Stories

## FOR INTERACTIVE ASSEMBLIES

15 story-based assemblies  
to get children talking



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IDEAL FOR KS1-2

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# 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.

## IDEAL FOR KS1-2

Collective worship is an ideal time to combine biblical teaching with contemporary storytelling. The 15 easy-to-tell, contemporary stories in this book are all based in the world of the classroom but have their roots in the parables of Jesus. They are designed to stimulate children's thinking and get them talking in the assembly and afterwards in the classroom.

As a means of teaching, the parables are vivid, challenging and memorable. They have been described as 'earthly stories with a heavenly meaning'. Primary children of all ages will recognize themselves and their classmates in the stories and, even if they do not recognize the original story, they are invited to relate to the underlying message that is the essence of the parable.

Each story is followed by questions for the assembly or classroom, designed to help the children interact with some of the issues raised, plus suggestions for practical activities, based on different learning styles.

Each story also includes:

- A target theme to help direct the teacher towards the main teaching objective
- A prayer or reflection to close the assembly if desired
- Bible references for the original parables
- Information to link the teaching to PSHE/Citizenship and the non-statutory national framework for RE or local SACRE guidelines



These stories will appeal to children from all faiths and cultural backgrounds and could be used in primary schools throughout the country.

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