

Introduction

Many teachers have found the reflective style of storytelling that has been developed within Godly Play to be a very helpful and effective way of opening up the Bible with children.

The following reflective story presentation is a version of the parable recorded in Isaiah 5. The prophet uses this story about the planting of a vineyard as a way of speaking about God's gift of creation to his people and God's hope that their lives would produce good fruit. God wants them to wake up and be people whose lives produce the fruit of thankfulness and goodness in response to his great love for them. Sadly, his people's lives had instead proved a bad harvest of rotten grapes.

Preparation

Spend time with the Bible story by presenting it, using three-dimensional materials.

1. Gather the class in a semicircle, using a back row of benches or chairs if necessary so that all the children can see the following presentation of the story clearly.
2. Tell the story using some carefully chosen items. You will also need the following items (try to find the most beautiful and attractive examples you can for each of these).

You will need a gold-coloured box/tray, large enough to contain:

- a piece of brown felt, about half a metre square and rounded at the corners
- several rough garden stones
- a tall block of wood like a tower (or several blocks to build a tower)
- a flat round piece of wood
- several green strips of felt
- several grey strips of felt
- some rotten grapes (wait for some to go off in a fruit bowl or paint your own version).

As you tell this story, slowly and carefully, focus on the objects that you bring out of the box to create the vineyard. Don't look at the children but become absorbed in the story itself. At the end, pause for a while before prompting the children's thinking further with some wondering questions.



Development

Pick up the special box and admire it.

I wonder what this could be. It looks very special. I wonder whether it contains a special message for God's people. Prophets brought special messages like this.

Let's see what is inside.

Open the box partially and remove the brown underlay, then put the box to one side.

I wonder what this is. I wonder what this has got to do with the special message from God. I wonder what it really is.

Slowly open out the brown underlay and look at it carefully on both sides. Gradually lay it down and spread it out in the centre of the story space.

We need something more than this... *(look in the box)* but there is nothing else in here to help us get ready for this special message. *(Pause.)*

God's people were very happy. God had given them a special place to live and a special building - the temple - where they could meet with him. God loved his people and wanted to be close to them but they often forgot about this. They forgot to love God and so that meant they also forgot to love others. God was sad because this was not how it was meant to be.

God sent his special prophets to talk to the people. Prophets are people who know things. They know what is important. Prophets come close to God and God comes so close to them that they know what special things God wants to say to his people. Isaiah was one of these prophets. God wanted him to tell the people how sad God was. This is the message he gave Isaiah to share. It is really a sad song.

Move your hand out over the felt, smoothing it down again.



The one I love, said Isaiah, once owned land for a vineyard. It was on a hillside. He wanted to grow grapes there in the rich fertile soil.

So he dug over the land to get it ready.

Mime this with your hand.

He dug up all the stones that would get in the way of the roots.

Pour the stones from the special box all over the cloth and then, one by one, remove them carefully, placing them in a pile on the edge.

He planted the vine seeds.

Carefully push the imaginary seeds into the brown cloth, one by one and in several places.

He built a strong wall around the vineyard.

Lay down the grey strips along the edges of the felt underlay.

And he planted a hedge there, to make sure his vineyard was safe from wild animals and thieves.

Lay down the green strips, also around the edge.

He built a tall watchtower...

Place a tall wooden block (or build it up from small wooden blocks) in the left-hand corner nearest the storyteller.

... so he could keep a careful eye on all that happened in his vineyard.

Finally, he built a great tub in the ground, which was the wine vat, where one day he hoped to collect all the grapes and press them into the best wine ever.

Place the circle of wood in the opposite corner to the tower.

Isaiah sang: 'There is nothing that the one I love didn't do to make this the best vineyard ever.'

So he waited for the vines to grow, watching over them day and night.

Touch the top of the watchtower gently.

Time passed. The sun shone and the rains came and the vines grew.

Raise the flat of your hand slowly at various points across the brown underlay to imitate the rising of the vine stocks.



He was waiting for the day when he would pick the good, juicy green grapes. But that day never came.

Instead, all that the vineyard produced were wild grapes. They were sour and ugly and rotten.

Place some of the rotten grapes or a picture of them on to the brown felt. Pick them up again and look at them in disgust.

The vineyard owner said, 'What has gone wrong? What sort of harvest is this? It is all bad.'

Pause for a while with the story laid out in front of the children and then, when you feel the time is right, ask a few questions to help them in their thinking.

Reflective questions

- I wonder what the vineyard's owner will do next.
- I wonder what else the owner could have done to get a good crop.
- I wonder why the grapes were all bad.
- I wonder who this vineyard owner really is.
- I wonder what the grapes really are.
- I wonder where this vineyard really is.
- I wonder what was God's special message in this story.