

Introduction

In this story from the early days of the church, we see how the first Christians had to battle with their prejudices when they realised that God intended their newfound faith to be open to anyone, irrespective of nationality and culture. Peter had only told the story Jesus told to fellow Jews up to this point in the New Testament. God speaks to him using a special vision in order to let him know that those who are non-Jews (Gentiles) should also hear the news about Jesus. Peter overcomes his prejudices and responds to the request of the Roman soldier Cornelius to come and explain the Christian faith to him. Cornelius and his family become Christian believers. The story can be found in the Acts of the Apostles ch.10.

Preparation

The key issues to be addressed in this session are:

- Not judging others by the outward appearance
- Overcoming prejudice
- Being open to learn from others
- That it is not weakness to change one's mind about someone

A key Bible verse for this session is:

Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does what is right, no matter what nation they come from. Acts 10:34

Development

1. Here is a way into the theme of this story

- *Not what it seems!*
Assemble a series of digital photographs of everyday objects but from unusual angles or where only one part of the item is the focus. Project these pictures onto an interactive white board. What is the object each time?
We need to see things from other perspectives in order to get the whole picture, otherwise we may judge incorrectly.
Pictures could be, for example, of: part of a wheel hub; the bottom of a light bulb; the handle of a frying-pan; the stitching on a football; the top of a mobile-phone etc
- *Now you see it!*
Collect together a number of optical illusions - you can find some of these by searching the Internet. These are pictures that could be more than one thing, depending how we view them. What we first see isn't always all we can see. There is more to most things than that which first meets the eye.
- *That's typical!*

Cut out a collection of head-and-shoulders pictures of a variety of working people representing different ethnic and social backgrounds. Mount these on cards or scan them to project them onto a screen. In groups now ask the children to decide what sort of job goes with each person in their opinion. Explore the reasons why they have made their choices. For some of us certain jobs and professions carry certain stereotypes of the person that does that particular occupation. Sometimes therefore we can be too quick to judge what another person is really like. We need to know the facts first.

- *Cross the circle if...*

Stand the children in a circle and then ask them to walk across the circle, if what is said by the leader applies to them. Use this as a way into the topic of prejudice.

Cross the circle if...

- you've ever seen someone begging on the street.
- you've seen someone begging but have turned and walked on the other side rather than go by them.
- you've ever voted by phone for anyone on a TV show
- you've ever voted against someone because you didn't like the way they looked
- you've ever seen someone left all alone in the playground
- you've seen someone by himself or herself but you have deliberately avoided going to talk to them
- you've ever listened to gossip about someone else
- you've heard untrue gossip but decided to say nothing

2. Here are some ways of working with the Bible story

- First, some simple drama ideas for telling this Bible story

Choose someone to be Peter who should sit in the middle of the circle of children and then lie down and pretend to sleep. On the signal of a clap from the leader, he/she should wake up still dreaming and indicate by rubbing his stomach that he's/she's very hungry. Now invite some other members of the circle to come over to him/her and suggest some unusual, exotic foods to eat. Each time Peter should say 'I couldn't possibly eat that'. At this point the whole of the circle should chorus to Peter the following words: 'But Peter, God made all these foods and says they're OK'.

After that, the teacher should stamp on the floor to imitate the banging on a door and announce that visitors have arrived asking Peter to visit their master's house. Peter should then say, 'I couldn't possibly meet him' At this point the whole of the circle should chorus to Peter the following words: 'But Peter, God made all these people and says they're OK'.

Alternatively,

Set the class off walking around the room greeting each other in different ways as they pass, as you direct. For example: with a smile, with a scowl, with a stare, with a sad face etc. But the group must freeze as statues whenever you call out the word 'freeze'.

Now ask the children to get into groups of five or six. In these groups they should work out a short improvised piece of drama on the theme of prejudice. Each person in the group should have one line to say. They should decide on an imaginary victim of prejudice about whom they are talking. Each line must give some sort of clue about the reason for their prejudice. For example, they don't like him or her because... of his nationality, his colour, his beliefs, his habits, his age, or the place he lives. Each individual line should not quite give away the whole truth about the prejudice but be a clue. After time to prepare, ask each group to enact their scene, while the others guess what sort of prejudice is being talked about.

Next the group should act out another scene in which they again have only one line each but which should express some understanding and some rethinking about the imagined victim of prejudice. Can the group be as convincing about overcoming their prejudices and changing their minds?

3. Here are some discussion starters, once the class has explored the Bible story

- Why do you think Peter was unwilling to eat the different animals he saw in his vision?
- Why do think God sent this vision three times?
- Why did God need to prepare Peter so carefully before he met Cornelius?
- Why do you think the Jews didn't mix with Romans?
- What do you think Peter was thinking about as he travelled to see Cornelius?
- What do you think Peter's friends thought of what he was doing?
- What do you think Peter learnt from this event?
- What did Cornelius discover in this story?

4. Here is an idea to present this story as a class assembly

Rehearse the following short scene with groups from your class. Alternatively, you could turn the following idea into a short story.

You will need 10 children. This is the situation:

The children decide to play five-a-side football. Two leaders should quickly emerge who will then choose others for their respective teams. The rest all clamour to be picked first but one person is always being pushed aside and whenever he or she speaks up, there are cries of: 'Don't pick him he's useless'; 'She's no-good'; 'He can't play to save his life'; 'People like him/her will only be a drag on the team'; 'He's new so we don't want him'; 'We don't want her to play with us' etc. This one will always remain unpicked and eventually is left alone.

There is a pause when this happens and then he or she says 'But what about me?' The others say, 'Come on, we can play without him/her. We will take turns in being a referee, so we will only play four aside instead'. They then leave and the person who wasn't picked is alone on stage.

A teacher comes on with a big smile and congratulates the one that is left, saying: 'We have just got all your information through from your old school, Dean/Sharon. They are very sad to lose you, particularly from the football team. You were their star player, weren't you?'

Read out the following questions and leave them up for a time of reflection:

- I wonder why the children wouldn't pick Dean/Sharon?
- I wonder why Dean/Sharon never said he/she was such a good player?
- I wonder if we've ever done something similar?

5. Here are some ideas for working out what this story means for people today.

This can be linked to a Circle Time session and explores PSHE issues.

Arrange the children to stand together in the middle of your room. On one wall put the word 'yes' and on the other wall opposite put the word 'no'. In line with the middle the room where children are standing, the word 'unsure' should be visible. Following each situation below, the children should decide whether they will go to the 'yes' wall, or to the 'no' wall, or stay 'unsure' in the middle. Use the following situations to explore the topic of prejudice.

Situation 1

A new boy has joined your class. He comes from a different part of the world and his English is poor. The teacher asks everyone to make him feel welcome and to make an effort to invite him to join in with their games. However, every time you try and talk with him he just stares rudely and won't smile at you. Do you keep on trying to talk to him?

Situation 2

On holiday you meet some new friends on the beach. They are great fun to be with and seem to have everything going for them: the best clothes, the best toys and equipment, the best ideas for games. One morning, once your parents have dozed off sunbathing, these new friends suggested popping off into the town to go and visit the market there. It all sounds very tempting. Do you go with them?

Situation 3

You get on the bus to go home and there is only one seat left vacant. It is next to an old lady with wild-looking hair and wearing a shabby overcoat. You've seen her before and you don't like the look of her. Also, you have heard other people calling her names because of her eccentric appearance. However, you are very tired and would love to sit down. Do you sit next to her?

6. Here are some ideas for extension material

- Cut-out a selection of pictures of a variety of different people from magazines. Create a large collage with the following title: *Different faces, different races*. Beneath the collage, add the words: *God made them all*
- Look up what Paul writes to the Christians at a place called Galatia. Clearly there was prejudice about some people in this church. Read Galatians 3:27-29. Now read James 2:1-5. What sort of prejudice problem was he writing about? How does he



suggest that his readers should think differently about this?

- Look through the advert pages of your local newspaper. Cut out those that make it clear to the applicants that anyone can apply for this job. You may find words such as 'irrespective of age, colour, race etc'. Why do you think these words are often added nowadays?
- Do some internet research into the story of Rosa Parks, whose action of sitting on a whites-only bus in America in the 1950s triggered changes in the way in which black people were treated. Alongside this, find out as much you can about the life and work of Martin Luther King, who among other things also championed equal rights for black citizens of the United States.
- Do some investigation of your own into one particular prejudice. Interview some of your friends and also some older adults in your school. Ask each age group what they think about the other group.

Young people should be asked to complete the line, 'I think old people today are...' Older people should be asked to complete the line, 'I think young people today are...'

Can you identify any prejudices among the replies?

Can you make suggestions as to how each group can see the other differently?