

## Introduction for teachers

How can we show respect for other people, if we disagree with them? This story tells how Jesus went outside the walls of Jerusalem to visit a local *asclepeion* - a temple of healing dedicated to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

## Preparation

If you can, show images of the actual location where this story takes place (the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem) and of Asclepius, son of Apollo in Greek mythology. Please ensure you have the **necessary permission** before using any images obtained from the Internet.

## Introduction

Who do you respect? What does the word 'respect' mean?

*Have a quick discussion in pairs, then feedback. Share a dictionary definition, such as:*

'Respect: having a good opinion of someone else, admiring somebody else, holding them in high regard.'

Of course, we can admire someone and still disagree with them. Our world has lots of people who believe different things about God. There are Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, Humanists and many more. But if we disagree, does that mean we should keep quiet about our own beliefs? Here's a strange little story about - well, I won't tell you yet.

But I'll need your help to retell the story using your hands and fingers. So, using your arms and fingers make:

- a man lying on a mat (*left hand, first two fingers splayed out on the back of your right hand*)
- a pool of water (*two arms in a rounded horizontal shape*)
- a pathway going down into the water (*right hand curved, use fingers of the left hand to 'walk' down the right arm and 'jump' into the right hand*)

Now, using one hand and arm, make a hissing snake!

Now, look like you're reaching in your pocket to pay some money.

There will be other acting moments too, but we'll make those up as we go along.

## Development

Have you ever been poorly for a long time? There was once a man, living near the great city of



Jerusalem, who was poorly and wanted to get well. But it was taking a very long time, and he couldn't walk. Imagine that. How could he get about? How could he earn a living? We don't know his name, but let's call him... Renatus.

Here he is, **lying on his mat**. (*Left hand, first two fingers splayed out on the back of your right hand.*)

But there was one place where Renatus believed he could get better. It was called an *asclepeion*, a Greek temple of healing, just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It was a shrine with a **sacred pool** (*two arms in a rounded horizontal shape*) dedicated to the Greek god of healing, **Asclepius**, who was the son of Apollo and whose symbol was a **snake**. (*Make a hissing snake shape with an arm and hand.*)

People would go to the pool in search of cures for their illnesses. Some stayed for years, waiting and hoping. But many Jewish people thought the *asclepeion* was a bad place because it was all a lie, and the Greek gods were fakes.

Renatus had been coming to the **asclepeion** (*make the pool shape*) for 38 years, hoping for a cure, keeping all the rules of the place, spending **a lot of money** (*reach into pocket to pay some money*) on doctors and giving many offerings to the god **Asclepius** (*hissing snake shape*).

But nothing had changed. His legs still didn't work. (*Shrug and audibly sigh.*)

But then one day, sitting and waiting by the **sacred pool** (*make the pool shape*), he got into a conversation with another visitor - a young man (*point to the left*) who didn't look poorly at all, but was just sitting, watching everyone, taking everything in. Why was he here?

The young man suddenly turned to look at Renatus. 'Do you really want to be well?' he asked. What a strange question!

'Of course!' said Renatus. 'I've been coming to this **sacred pool** (*make the pool shape*) for years! But the rules say that the water only works at special times, and then everybody else pushes in front of me because they want to get in first and get healed.' (*Right hand curved, use fingers of the left hand to 'walk' down the right arm and 'jump' into the right hand.*)

'My legs don't work, so I get pushed to the back every time.'

'That doesn't sound fair to me,' said the young man. 'And I think you've waited long enough. So, come on then. Stand up. Pick up your mat and walk.'

(*Point with left hand, then left hand on right hand, two fingers as the legs, lying still.*)

Pick up your mat and walk? Was this young man mad? But - Renatus felt strange. There was something different about him. This young man wasn't like a doctor or a priest, who always asked for money (*reach into pocket*) before saying a spell or giving some medicine. This young man was



just saying, 'Stand up'.

*(Left hand resting on right hand, two fingers as the legs, still, then starting to move, slightly.)*

Then all of a sudden - OWWW! Renatus could feel his legs getting stronger, bendier. Wow, they were hurting, but they were working!

*(Left hand on right hand, two fingers as the legs, starting to move a lot more, flexing.)*

Slowly, painfully, Renatus picked himself up from the ground - and found he could stand. *(Left hand 'standing up' on the horizontal right hand.)* How? Why? This didn't make any sense. But the young man had walked away into the crowd and couldn't be seen. Didn't he want to be paid? What was going on? This wasn't how doctors worked in the asclepeion! There were rules for this!

Renatus tried picking up his mat, and found - yes - he could walk now, like everybody else. Slowly, he went to the main door. *(Left hand 'walking' along arm, away from pool.)*

So, where should he go with his new legs? Renatus thought hard, made a choice, then stepped out along the track, **through the gate of the great city of Jerusalem** *(two arms, hands 'going through a large door')* and then up the hill, towards the **Jewish temple** *(big house shape)*. Perhaps he would find the young man there, and pay him some money, say thank you or something. That's what people did if they got better, didn't they?

Then there was a shout. 'Hey! You! What are you doing!' Someone was pointing at him from the roadside, an old man looking cross. 'You! *(Point)* You're breaking the Sabbath rules!' said the old man.

'Me? How?' said Renatus. *(Point at self, looking puzzled.)*

'You're carrying a mat on the Sabbath. That's work! That's not what we do in this city! We have rules, you know!'

'Tell that to the person who made me walk!' said Renatus, laughing, carrying on walking up the hill. The old man looked furious, but stomped away, muttering. Up by **the temple** *(big house shape)* Renatus didn't know what to do. What were the rules here? Should he give **some money** *(reach into pocket)* to the people in charge? That's what Greeks normally did. Should he pray to the Jewish God? He wasn't sure. Then he heard a voice next to him.

*(Point to the left.)* It was the young man again. 'Just be thankful', he said. Renatus reached into his pocket for **some money**. *(Reach into pocket.)*

'No,' said the young man. *(Hand up, palm outwards.)* 'Keep your money. Just be thankful. Use this to **change your life** *(make a horizontal circle in the air with a finger)*. You've made a lot of mistakes over the years, including going to that **snake god** *(make the hissing snake shape)* for help. Learn from me instead.'



Renatus was puzzled. 'Who are you? A doctor?'

'No. My name's Jesus. I'm doing a lot of new things here for my Father God.' (*Both hands raised in gesture of prayer.*) 'So just trust me, and choose better in future.'

And Renatus did. But when he told others about what had happened, it made a lot of things rather awkward for Jesus. I wonder why? (Because he had broken a lot of bad rules?)

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I wonder...

What is this story saying about Jesus?

What is this story saying about respecting other people who believe different things to us? Jesus could have stayed away from that Greek temple because it was against his own religion. I wonder why he went there? He didn't go charging in, smashing the place up and kicking over tables because he didn't agree with it. But he did go in there to make a difference.

And Renatus: he'd needed help for years, and finally it came from a complete stranger. What a surprise! I wonder how God could use people who are different to us, to teach us something important?

## Prayer

Father God, our world can be so confusing. There are so many people who believe so many different things! Help us to search for the truth, and remember that everyone is precious to you, no matter who they are or what they believe. Amen

## Information for teachers

The remains of ancient Greek asclepeions can be found across the region surrounding the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, in places where Greek culture spread under the reign of Alexander the Great. Many continued to thrive under Roman rule.

In the New Testament, the Jerusalem asclepeion is called the pool of Bethesda. What was Jesus doing in a pagan temple of healing, when many of his own people wouldn't go near such a place? The Gospel of John places this story (John 5:1-18) soon after the moment when Jesus had positive encounters with Samaritans (members of a heretical Jewish sect), so perhaps it signals the point where Jesus began seriously challenging preconceptions about God's love for all peoples. In the story, he was breaking several religious rules by entering a pagan Greek shrine, healing on the Jewish Sabbath - because that constituted work - and apparently making himself equal with God by calling God his own Father. 'Renatus' also broke religious rules by going to the pagan shrine to look



for help and by carrying his mat on the Sabbath. The staff of the asclepeion might not have been happy either: Jesus deprived them of a lucrative customer and performed his healing without a licence!