



On your marks

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 about Jesus 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 prejudice 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.

Get set

You will need:

- a series of digital photographs of everyday objects from unusual angles or where only a part of the object is the focus – for example, 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, and so on
- pictures of optical illusions – from the Internet
- a collection of head-and-shoulder pictures of a variety of working people representing different ethnic and social backgrounds
- some magazines and local newspapers
- collage materials
- A4 paper with the words ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘unsure’ written clearly on different sheets

You can find the story in Acts 10:1-47. There is a retelling of this story in The Barnabas Children’s Bible (stories 330-332).

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 right, no matter what nation they come from. (Acts 10:34-35, CEV)

Some key issues to be addressed in this session are:

- Not judging others by their outward appearance
- Overcoming prejudice
- Being open to learn from others
- It is not a weakness to change one’s mind about someone or something
- God wants all people to come to know him through Jesus

Go!

1. Opening up the story



Here are some ways to open up the story:

Things aren't always what they seem! Assemble a series of digital photographs of everyday objects from unusual angles or where only a part of the object is the focus – for example, 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, and so on. You could project these pictures on to a screen or simply show some enlarged versions. Can your group guess what the object is each time?

We need to see things from various perspectives in order to get the whole picture, otherwise we may judge incorrectly.

Now you see it! Collect together a number of optical illusions – pictures that appear to be something other than what they really are, depending how we view them. Ask your group what they see in each picture.

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-shoulder pictures of a variety of working people representing different ethnic and social backgrounds. Mount these on cards or scan them to project them on to a screen. In groups, ask the children to decide what sort of job they think goes with each person. Explore the reasons for 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... Ask the group to stand in a circle and then ask them to walk across the circle if what you – the leader – says applies to them. Use this as a way to introduce the topic of prejudice.

Cross the circle if...

- you've ever seen someone begging on the street
- you've seen someone begging and have walked around them 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 left alone and 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. Telling the story

Here is a simple drama to tell the story in Acts 10.

Choose someone to be Peter. This person should then sit in the middle of a circle made by the others and lie down, pretending to be asleep. On the signal of a clap from you – the leader – Peter should wake up still dreaming and rub his stomach to indicate that he is very hungry. Now invite some members of the circle to go over to him and suggest some unusual, exotic foods to eat.

Each time, Peter should say: 'I couldn't possibly eat that.'

To which everyone in the circle should reply: 'But, Peter, God made all these foods and says they're OK.'

Now stamp your foot on the floor to imitate the banging on a door and announce that visitors have arrived to ask Peter to visit their master's house.

Peter should then say: 'I couldn't possibly meet your master.'

To which everyone in the circle replies: 'But, Peter, God made all these people and says they're OK.'

Use this as a lead into the rest of the story... what happened next!

3. Talking about the story

- Why do you think Peter was unwilling to eat the different animals he saw in his vision?
- Why do you 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. Playing with the story

Choose from one of the following ideas:

- Cut out a selection of pictures of different people from magazines and 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 (Galatians 3:27-29). Clearly, there was prejudice about some people in this church. Now read James 2:1-5. What sort of prejudice is he writing about? How does he suggest his readers should think differently about this?
- Look through the job advert pages in your local newspaper. Cut out those that make it clear that anyone can apply for the job – for example, it may say 'irrespective of age, colour, race...' Why do you think these words are often added nowadays?
- Research the story of Rosa Parks, whose action of sitting on a whites-only bus in America in



the 1950s triggered changes in the way black people were treated. Alongside this, find out as much as you can about the life and work of Martin Luther King, who among other things also championed equal rights for black citizens in America.

5. **Reflecting on the story**

Attach the A4 paper to the walls so that the word 'yes' is at one end, 'no' is at the other and 'unsure' is in the middle of the room. Now, get your group to stand together in the middle of the room. For each of the two scenarios described below, everyone should decide on their response and move to the appropriate wall, or stay where they are if 'unsure'. These scenarios explore the topic of prejudice.

After each scenario, pause to pray together about people facing loneliness or being isolated because they are different. Ask God to help you all to see things and people as he does.

Scenario 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 make an effort to invite him to join in with your games. However, every time you try to talk to him, he just stares rudely and won't smile at you. Do you keep trying to talk to him?

Scenario 2: 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?