



OtB What's That!

Open the Book Never heard of it?

Open THE Book What book?

THE BIBLE of course!

Open the Book is an initiative aiming to bring Bible stories into primary schools using volunteers from local churches.

When you think back to your childhood you can probably name dozens of stories which constituted the heritage of nearly every child - Snow White, Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, The Water Babies, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, A Christmas Carol, Pinocchio, The Tortoise and the Hare, David and Goliath, Johan and the Whale, The Good Samaritan, Jesus calming the storm on the lake etc.

Do present day youngsters know them, in particular the last four I've listed? But the Bible has some amazing stories, which should be available to all children. They are just as much part of our culture as Grimm's Fairy Tales or Aesop's Fables or Shakespeare.

If you are surprised that we are allowed to tell Bible stories in our multifaith society, the handbook for OtB assures us that it fulfils the requirement set down by Ofsted and the Church School Inspection for multi-faith collective worship.



Each story is used for an assembly and so we are very popular with teachers who would prefer not to take one! Our group of eight volunteers consists of two men and six women from different churches and denominations, though we don't all take part every time.

Our Curate, Sonia Kasibante, had the idea to form a group and put out invitations for volunteers at the churches she is in contact with. So far, we have done one assembly for each half term, so six in the first year, all at St John's Primary School, though we will probably take on another school as well in the near future.

We meet a week or two beforehand to allocate roles and sort out stage directions. Sometimes we have a second run through either in the New Room or in the school hall, although this is not always available.

OtB is growing fast nationwide and like Messy Church is resourced by the Bible Society. In 2017 it expanded by an average of 83 new storytellers 5 and 25 new schools every month! The latest article I have is about the success of the scheme in Ghana!

Each volunteer has a copy of The Lion Storyteller Bible, which includes four CDs of recordings of the stories, which are imaginatively adapted to sound good when read aloud. There is also a handbook and other helpful material available, so that there is guidance for a task, which might seem daunting to volunteers with no experience of teaching. We are not allowed to change the stories but have to keep to the text as written and we have to resist the temptation to evangelise. Sonia will introduce each story and give any instructions if we require all the children to participate during the story.

Each story is dramatised, with the use of costumes and props being an integral element each time.

We have been very fortunate to inherit a complete set of props and costumes from a group who have completed the whole

cycle of stories twice, so there is not much left for us to prepare on that front.

The adult volunteers may be required to take some of the main roles and say a few words, so in A Sad Day they were used for the narrator, the voice of God, Adam, Eve and the snake.

Each time we decided how many children we would like to incorporate and put in an order before the day! They come to us first, so that we can put on costumes, give them props and explain what we would like them to do. We don't have much time before the hall fills with the rest of the children, so our 'extras' can't do anything complicated.

In the creation story, and this next story, they were mainly used to carry props across the 'stage' - sun, moon, stars, animals (puppets, masks and inflatables!) whilst the youngest group had headbands with flowers and plants. Large pieces of coloured cloth represent land and sea, stretched out and rippled for water. When the snake appeared all the children got the chance to participate with HISSING. These communal sound effects can be very effective and great fun.

To represent rain in the Noah story, the audience were split into three groups. The first group lightly tapped their thighs to depict a gentle shower, which soon got heavier with the addition of the middle group and turned into a stormy downpour when all three groups were slapping their legs with all their might.

At the end Sonia will lead a few moments of quiet, when the children are invited to think about any moral or spiritual values which have been apparent. Sonia then says a short prayer and invites the children to make it their own if they wish to by saying Amen at the end.

So what effect is this having on the pupils at St John's? We think that children remember drama better than just a straight story. Remember also that over 30 nationalities are represented at St Johns and that for some of these children,

English is not their first language, therefore a dramatised version of the story is easier to grasp.

The children are very responsive and eager to take part. One small girl begged Sonia to let her join in next time. "I have to" she said, "I'm desperate!" Sonia explained that we don't choose the children.

Karen's nine-year-old neighbour goes to St Johns, as do two sisters who also live nearby. They were all interested in talking to her initially but are now more interested in racing their scooters at break-neck speed down the steep road, which is a cul-de-sac. She says she did exactly the same at their age.

Karen also asked the 11-year-old son of one of our singers, which was his favourite story. To her surprise he answered "the last one - Joseph". This was by far the most complicated, being in two parts and involving so many characters - Jacob and his 12 sons to start with. Karen felt it was probably the least satisfactory not having enough preparation time and feeling rather chaotic. Which just goes to prove the Lord can use us even when we aren't perfect - or because we aren't perfect.

We are hoping that this article has awakened interest in some of our readers. If anyone would like to join us, we would be very happy to include you.



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