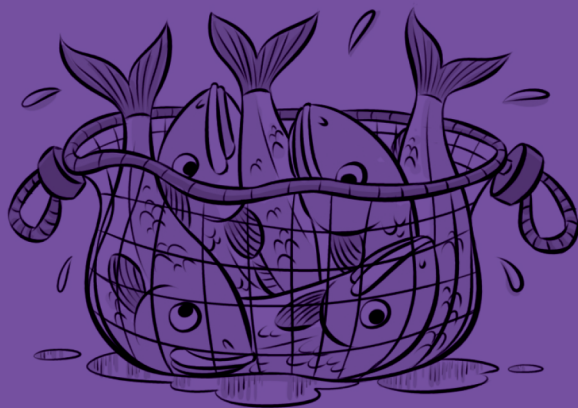


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words



messy parables

25 retellings for all ages



Martyn Payne

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Introduction

There is no doubt that a well-told story rarely fails to attract and hold an audience. And so it's no surprise that it is the Bible passages that tell a tale that work best when it comes to the Messy Church celebration. Working with a theme or doctrinal truth is always a much more challenging ask of the Messy team and of the Messy storyteller. It is a huge relief and encouragement, therefore, to discover that Jesus, surely the best of communicators, almost always chose stories as the way to captivate his messy audiences.

Stories are every bit as powerful and effective as the best of sermons, however well their teaching is presented. In fact, stories often do a better job, as all speakers will testify when they receive feedback on what was said. It is invariably the story that is remembered long after the bullet points on the screen have been forgotten.

Some of the best Bible stories are, of course, the parables of Jesus, which is why this book is devoted to creative ways of telling them with today's audiences, whether in Messy Church or other multigenerational church settings. Each parable will, I hope, inspire you to become a better Bible storyteller, particularly in Messy Church where so many of these stories have never been heard before. They still have the potential to transform people's lives as they enable families to meet with God in the story, as well as through the storybook people of God who they encounter during two hours of creativity, celebration and a shared meal.

The first part of this book contains some insights and ideas to help you become a storyteller. It explores the power of story, and of parables in particular, as well as the challenge of sharing the story with a pan-generational audience. There is also advice on how to go about creating your own Messy stories. In the second part you will

find the parables themselves. When Jesus talked with his disciples about why he used parables, he gave this advice for teachers and by inference for faith storytellers:

[Jesus] said to them: ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’

MATTHEW 13:52

This is exactly what Jesus did with his parables. They were very often stories that drew on existing themes in the Jewish scriptures, such as shepherds and sheep, sibling rivalry and the care of vineyards, but to which he then introduced new elements and unexpected twists that made the stories unique and which took his audiences into unexplored territory. They were a captivating mix of the familiar and the unknown.

This collection of creative ways to tell 25 of the parables tries to emulate this pattern for audiences today. I have drawn on tried-and-tested storytelling approaches and familiar formats such as nursery rhyme, simple drama and the use of visual aids, but I have also brought the material up to date with contemporary references and language that will resonate with a Messy Church congregation.

Some of the stories have already appeared in an earlier format on the BRF Children and Families website, but they have been revised and reshaped; the majority are brand new. You could say that this book itself is a mixture of old and new treasures. For each parable there are some background notes, which are designed both to unpack the more obscure references that would have been understood only by audiences at the time, and to help the storyteller think through the story. And the stories themselves use a variety of styles. One of my aims in writing this book has been to introduce leaders to alternative ways of telling Bible stories, which I hope will stretch the users’ skills as they have a go at new approaches. I hope that this will nurture and

develop your God-given gift of storytelling, as well as help you find your own authentic storytelling voice. Finally, there is a suggested Messy Church congregational prayer activity suitable for all ages that links with the content of the parable and the storytelling. The Bible passages for each parable are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise stated.

Jesus used his special stories to challenge his listeners to think again about life and death, about heaven and hell, about themselves and their neighbours, and about the ways of this world and those of the kingdom of heaven. We are invited to do the same for our generation, using the gift of these stories to help new audiences hear and respond to God's call to put their trust in him.

My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. *I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old – things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.* He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, *so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God.*

PSALM 78:1–7a (emphasis mine)

Part 1

All about storytelling

The importance of story

Live storytelling is back in fashion... or maybe it never went away.

In a world that seems dominated by multimedia presentations, YouTube videos, DVDs and computer-mediated friendships, the wonderful novelty of face-to-face storytelling is a breath of fresh air, particularly for today's digital generation.

Live Bible storytelling is enjoying a revival too, which of course was always the way it was meant to be. There is no mistaking the importance and power of stories about God, told by storytellers whose hearts have been touched by those very same stories. However, none of this should surprise us. Our Christian Bible is the holy repository of 66 books-worth of stories that were originally alive on people's lips and which were passed on faithfully down the generations. The oral tradition existed long before the written word and it is still part of our DNA. Human beings love to tell stories. Just spend some time watching and listening to people in your local café or on the bus to discover that this is true.

We tell stories to each other to build relationships, to pass on news (and gossip), to make sense of what is happening to us and to wrestle with the big questions of life. Not all of this happens at the same time, of course, or even in the same conversation, but this is the sort of storytelling that makes us tick as communities. It is as we talk through things together that we learn to see the world differently from another's point of view and, as a result, that person's story helps shape and develop our own. One possible translation of John's famous opening verse from the first chapter of his Gospel is, 'In the beginning was the conversation'. We are made in the image of God and part of this likeness is found in the fact that we love to tell stories to each other and be in conversation, just as God is within the Trinity.

And when it comes to trying to get our heads around the ultimate questions about life, death and the universe, people have always turned to stories to make sense of it all. If, for example, you were to ask one of God's people in the Old Testament what their God was like, they definitely wouldn't have replied by listing a series of theological truths about God's nature. Rather, they would have told you their story, their experience of God. 'Well, let me tell you about when we were slaves in Egypt...' they would begin, and so the storytelling would start. You can read one such example of this for yourself in Psalm 105:12–45. And it was exactly this story that was repeated year on year at the Passover festival, when the family gathered around the storytelling table and the youngest child present asked, 'What makes this night so special?'

Stories invite us into a safe, shared space of listening where we can make our own discoveries about how what we hear might impact us today. Whether we are listening to the story of Joseph on his long journey from being an unlovely, boastful brother to when he rescues his whole family from famine, or of Ruth bravely deciding to stay with her mother-in-law and become an outsider in a new land, or of Job wrestling with why the innocent should suffer in this world, we are drawn into the story, inspired by the thoughts and ideas there and moved to find out more about who God is, who we are and who we are meant to become.

Stories can be received on many different levels and what we take from a story often depends on our level of engagement with what we are hearing. So how does that work? Why not try the following fun exercise, which I've often used with groups in storytelling workshops to help them understand the importance and impact of story?

- First take a deep breath and hold that in. This is like the story being taken into us, literally an initial 'in-spiration'.
- Next let out the air with a long 'ahh' sound. This is our time to think about the story, a time to wonder and find ourselves in the story.
- Then lift one finger up as a gesture of discovery and turn the long

‘ahh’ into an ‘ah-ha’. This is that moment when the story begins to make sense and show us something new.

- Finally, lift up both hands with thumbs up on each and a broad smile or even a laugh as you turn the ‘ah-ha’ into ‘ha-ha’. This is that moment of insight from the story that will stay with you for ever. It is a moment of transformation. The story is part of you now and you are part of the story.

This is how the best stories work and, in particular, it is how the stories of God can touch our lives. Our job as storytellers is to allow the Bible story to do its work in this way, both inspiring and transforming people for the better. This is why Jesus told stories as his preferred method for passing on the great truths about God and it is why Christians still do so today. Of course, stories can still be impactful when they come second-hand on a screen, but there is no doubting that something special happens when we hear a story directly from another person, particularly a person who tells that story from the heart because he or she has themselves been transformed by that very story.

It is our privilege and calling in church – whether Messy or otherwise – to let Bible stories do their work in this way, lifting them off the page and allowing them to breathe their blessing into the lives of those who listen. There is an old Chinese proverb that says that ‘the shortest distance between a person and a truth is a story’. In other words, stories are the best way in which we can discover truths about the world, ourselves and God. Nathan the prophet understood this when he was asked by God to tell King David that he had committed murder and adultery after he had stolen Bathsheba from her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–14). A direct accusation of the terrible sin wasn’t going to work, so instead Nathan told a story and it was this that touched David most powerfully and awoke his conscience. It was certainly the shortest and most effective way to the truth.

Bible stories do just this: open eyes to God’s presence, hearts to God’s love and minds to God’s truth. So let’s get busy telling Bible stories again... live, direct and with passion!

8 Messy excuses



The parable of the great banquet

He said to him, ‘Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.’

Jesus replied: ‘A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready.”

‘But they all began to make excuses. The first said, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.”

‘Another said, “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.”

‘Still another said, “I just got married, so I can’t come.”

‘The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

““Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

‘Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”’

Get ready

Jesus is eating again! So much of his teaching in the Gospels came during conversations at a meal table – no wonder the meal is such an important part of the whole experience of worship at Messy Church. This time, Jesus was dining at the home of one of the Pharisees and before he tells this parable he had commented both on the way the guests had all wanted to sit near the host and also on what God's guest list looks like for the party in heaven. This prompted the comment that led to this story.

Those listening to Jesus' story had all accepted invites to the Pharisee's party, but what about the most important invitation of all – God's invitation to be in heaven with him, the greatest party ever? The invited guests in the parable had said they could come, but when it came to the time to turn up they all decided they had other priorities. Jesus was clearly directing his story at the Pharisees and other religious leaders who, by inference, had said 'yes' to God with their lips but when it came to it, put their own interests first. This is, however, also a challenge to all of us. As was obvious from the response to Jesus' ministry, it was the 'poor, crippled, blind and lame' – the nobodies of society, then – who were the willing and welcomed guests at heaven's banquet.

As with all the parables of Jesus, this story would have unsettled his audience with the twist in the tale. The usual A-list celebs didn't bother to turn up, but the unexpected and undeserving crowds who never got invited to anything end up enjoying the feast. Jesus was turning upside down their ideas – and ours – of what God and heaven are like. Heaven is like a party and God's love is much bigger and more open-armed than they could ever have imagined. Are we ready to be surprised by God's love and by who we will meet in heaven?

A similar story is also found in Matthew 22:1–10, where it is a king hosting a wedding banquet for his son. Here the guests just refuse to turn up and even abuse the servants who invited them. The king's

reaction isn't just to invite in outsiders ('the bad as well as the good'), but to punish the original invitees. Here is a good example of Jesus the storyteller making use of a powerful parable more than once, adapting it for a different audience and purpose.

Get set

To help with the call and response part of the story, prepare a large placard with the words: 'What's the time, Messy Church?'

Go!

Let me ask a silly question. Who loves a party? Who doesn't love a party?

Call out your favourite party food, party drink, party game, party dance and party goodie-bag present.

Everyone loves a party. So if you get an invitation to a party, it would be very strange to turn it down. You'd have to have a very good reason. And the more important the party, the more you will make every effort to be there... surely?

Once Jesus was invited to a party but, as so often happened with Jesus, he surprised everyone by the things he did and the stories he shared. The people at this party were very exclusive. They'd only invited the best people. And the people who came had to sit in order of importance around the table. Nothing would be allowed to spoil this party. But Jesus took them by surprise.

Jesus wanted them to know about the very best party ever – a much better one than the one they were enjoying. He wanted them to know what God's party was like, what heaven is like, and who would be there.

Jesus decided it was time for a story.

Teach and invite everyone to learn a call and response, namely: 'What's the time, Messy Church?' to which the response initially is, 'It's time for a story!'

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's time for a story!

Practise this call and response but switch it around. Use the placard you have prepared to help the congregation know what to say when.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's time for a story!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's time for a story!

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's party time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's party time!

Once there was a rich man who decided to hold a great party – the biggest party ever. He let everyone know and invited everyone to come.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's preparation time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's preparation time!

The rich man got all his servants working hard. They set the tables with the finest silver cutlery; they put out the very best dinner plates; they polished the most sparkling glassware; and there were lots of really beautiful decorations. And then they set about cooking the best food ever. It was going to be the best party ever. When everything was prepared, he sent out his servant to say that they should come now and enjoy the feast.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's party time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's party time!

But then the strangest thing happened. The people who had been invited said the strangest things.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's property time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's property time!

Some decided they had property they needed to go and see; a field they had bought; a new plot of land for a house in the village; an allotment they needed to inspect. They were too busy to come.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's possessions time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's possessions time!

Some decided they had things they needed to go and look at; a new car they wanted to test-drive; new clothes they wanted to try on; a new iPad they wanted to play with. They were too busy to come.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's partner time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's partner time!

Some decided they had people to meet; a girlfriend to take out; a client to wine and dine; a friend to meet down the pub. They were too busy to come.

The man who had arranged the best party ever couldn't believe his ears. He was furious (and sad at the same time). They were turning down his invitation.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's party time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's party time!

So the man who had prepared the best party ever sent his servant out to find new people to invite.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's people-who-are-lonely time!

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's people-who-are-poor time!

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's people-who-are-messy time!

His servants brought in from the streets people who were lonely; people who were poor; and people whose lives were messy. But still there was room at the biggest party ever.

Everyone: What's the time, Messy Church?

Storyteller: It's plenty of room time!

Storyteller: What's the time, Messy Church?

Everyone: It's plenty of room time!

The man who invited everyone to 'the biggest party ever' wanted his house to be full. This party is for everyone who accepts his invitation. This party is the best party ever. This party is for you and for me, for ever.

Now who would turn down an invitation like that?

Prayer idea

In this prayer, when the leader says the words **too busy**, everyone should groan; when he or she says the word **party**, everyone should cheer.

Practise this.

Father God, we're sorry that we are often **too busy** to think about you.

But thank you that your love has prepared **a party** for everyone.

Father God, we're sorry that possessions, property and even people often make us **too busy** to think about coming to your **party**.

Father God, thank you for this story of Jesus that reminds us that you are never **too busy** to care about us and that you want us to enjoy life with you, which is the beginning of the best **party** ever.

Amen



Creative ways to share the stories Jesus told

Jesus' parables intrigued, inspired, engaged and challenged the crowds, combining everyday imagery with surprising twists that prompted all ages to wonder and discover the treasures of the kingdom of heaven for themselves. Through **25 tried-and-tested retellings**, together with sections on the **importance of story**, the **power of parable**, the **challenge of all-age storytelling** and **becoming a Messy storyteller**, this resource communicates the immediacy and relevance of Jesus' message for Messy congregations today.

Visit messychurch.org.uk/5504 for free template downloads



Martyn Payne is part of BRF's Messy Church team, visiting Messy Churches up and down the UK, listening to the stories of how Messy Church is developing, sharing good practice and bringing encouragement. Author of *Creative Ways to Tell a Bible Story* (BRF, 2013), he has a background in Bible storytelling and leading all-age worship, and is passionate about the blessing that comes when generations explore faith together.

Messy Church is a core part of BRF's overall vision to transform lives and communities through the Christian faith. Although sales of books and resources cover some of the costs of their production, Messy Church is funded primarily by donations, grants and legacies.

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