

STORIES ABOUT GOD

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I have told these stories to children in churches around Eastwood, in Sydney, over many years. Frequently I have been told by adults after a service that they couldn't remember what the sermon was about but they *loved* the story. No-one is too old to appreciate stories and, as Jesus knew, often the best way to get across a deep truth is through a story.

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THE GOLD-PLATED ICE-CREAM

I expect that you like ice-cream. Who likes ice-cream? Unfortunately being a hot day I couldn't bring along any to hand around because they would have melted by now.

Who likes special types of ice-cream? What special ice-creams have you had?

Like you, Maria loves ice-cream. She lives in a part of London called West Hampstead.

One day as she was walking past the tube railway station there she saw some people handing out free ice-creams. It was a new and very special ice-cream called the Gold-Plated Magnum and they were promoting them.

I don't know whether you've ever eaten a gold-plated ice-cream before? Maria certainly hadn't. Of course they weren't really gold-plated. They were large golden-coloured ice-creams that sparkled and gleamed as if they were covered in gold.

Maria took one and as she walked away she started to lick it. It tasted wonderful! She was going to enjoy it so much but ... what about when it was all gone? She couldn't go back to ask for another free one and she had forgotten the name.

What she would do was to find a shop that sold them and buy a second one. She would walk into a shop that sold ice-creams and show them this one and ask if they had one like it.

That meant of course that she couldn't eat this one just yet.

By the time she walked into the first shop, the gold-plated ice-cream was getting a little soft and some of it was sliding down the cone and dripping on the floor.

“No we don't have any ice-creams that look like that”, said the shop-keeper rather crossly, “and watch where you're dripping that one!”

By the time she found another shop that sells ice-cream, hers was half-melted. Maria put her handkerchief around the cone before she went into the shop so that it wouldn't drip onto the linoleum.

“Do you sell an ice-cream that looks like this?”

“Sorry miss. But hadn't you better be eating that one before it all melts away?”

But Maria knew that once she had eaten it she would have nothing to show the next shop-man.

By the time she eventually reached the third shop the bottom of the cone had become so soggy that it fell off and the golden ice-cream had dripped out so that all that was left was an empty, and rather soggy ice-cream cone with a hole in the bottom.

“Do you have an ice-cream that looks like this?”, she asked.

The shop-man looked at her and looked at the soggy cone, somewhat puzzled. Then he took a cone from under the counter, bit off the end of it and dunked it in the water in the washing-up bowl.

“There you are miss, that will be twenty cents.”

Perhaps Maria was too greedy. Instead of enjoying her first ice-cream she was already worrying about where to get a second one.

God wants us to work hard and study hard for our future. But we must also enjoy the free gifts that he has given us now. Some people, like Maria, are so worried about enjoying themselves in the future that they are not grateful for God's free gifts in the present. Gifts such as

youth, and health, and people who love you, and enough to eat, and sunshine.

There was once a greedy man who worked very hard all his life just so that he could be rich when he was old. Being rich he would enjoy himself, travel the world, have lots of girl-friends, buy a big yacht.

He worked ten-hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. He never took holidays. What kept him going was the dream of being rich in his retirement.

Well you can guess what happened. He worked so hard that near to the time that he would have retired, he got sick. He didn't die, yet, but he had to spend the rest of his days in bed. So he wasn't able to travel, was all alone and although he still bought a yacht, he wasn't able to enjoy it.

So as you grow up, work hard to get the things you want. But remember, don't forget that there are many good things that God gives us for nothing. Don't be so busy that you don't notice them.

Jesus said something about the lilies of the fields. But if he had lived in Australia he might have said it a little differently.

“Consider the wild-flowers that grow in the bush, they do not work like the ants and they don't spin webs like the spiders. But I tell you that not even ...

Tell me, who is the best-dressed person you know about?

Well not even is dressed as well as one of these flowers.”

Work hard but don't forget God's free gifts.

LIVING WATER

Brenda was a little girl from Bunyip Crossing who had never seen the surf. For all eight years of her little life she had lived in the dusty west until now she had the chance of a holiday by the sea.

She sat beside the roar of the waves on the beach, marvelling at all that power and energy as wave after wave came crashing in sending foam and spray in all directions.

So much power! How she wished she had a little of it for herself. For she was a sickly little girl who always felt weak and tired and she could only walk with the help of a walking stick. She would give anything to join the other surfers playing among the breakers, but for her it would have been too dangerous.

Instead, she had made it her project to collect specimens of sand. She had managed to find eight different colours – eight shades of brown and yellow, grey and orange and even a little pink.

Some she collected by the beach, others she could only find beside the little creek that runs into the lagoon. It was hard work as she hobbled around but it gave her a

great deal of pleasure. She would pour small amounts of the sands, layer upon layer, into little bottles as gifts for her family. But if she wasn't always so tired she would have been down there running and splashing with all the other children.

When she went back home she would be taking her little bottles of sand to remind her of the beach. But wouldn't it be nice if she could take back some of the surf as well! She had asked her older brother to take a plastic bottle out to where the waves were breaking to collect the foaming, swirling water, but of course when he got it back it was just like any other water, only dirtier. The foam and froth and bubbles had disappeared. The life, the energy of the surf had gone. It was just a bottle of dead surf! If only there was some way of bringing it back to life.

The day before she was due to go home she watched Gerry, one of the life-savers walking back to the clubhouse for his lunch. Although he was much older and much more active than she was, he had become one of her special friends. She slowly made her way over to him. She talked with him as he ate his sandwiches. When he had finished he reached into his canvas bag and pulled out a jar of fine white sand – at least that's what it looked like to Brenda. Where had he got such pure

white sand? Then he took out a glass and filled it with water from the tap near the door. Taking a plastic spoon from his bag he heaped it with the white sand and plunged it into the water, stirring vigorously.

The most amazing thing happened! The water became alive! It bubbled and sparkled and frothed and spluttered. Now to you and I there is no magic in a glass of fruit saline. Mix a spoonful in water and it bubbles up to make a refreshing drink. But Brenda had never seen fruit saline - never even heard of it. The general store in Bunyip Crossing had never stocked it, and whenever the general store in a small country town doesn't stock something, why it doesn't exist at all. Brenda believed that the glass contained a small portion of surf.

Her eyes opened even wider when Gerry raised the glass to his lips and drank it down in one gulp. In an instant she knew what she wanted. If only she could take some of that special sand back to Bunyip Crossing she could have the surf whenever she wanted.

It really was quite amazing – what was dead became alive. But what was even more amazing was that you could drink this surf. Gerry played along with her mistake and said, “how about a glass of waves and breakers for you?” He made a second glass of the stuff

for her and she drank it. It was good even if some of the bubbles went up your nose. She felt much more alive and a lot less tired. Some of the energy of the surf had gone inside of her.

Of course now that Brenda is a little older she knows that it is only fruit saline. But she still enjoys that refreshing bubbly drink because it reminds her that what seems dead can become alive, just as Jesus died and became alive again. It also reminded her that Jesus lives within her, refreshing her and giving her energy and life. And she also remembered the story in the Bible where Jesus met the woman at the well.

“If you drink the water from this well, you'll get thirsty again,” he said. “But if you drink the water that I can give you, you will never be thirsty again. The living water that I can give you is like a fountain inside of you, bubbling and sparkling over into eternal life.”

“ME” DUST

It all happened one night. Everybody in the town went to bed as usual but when they woke up next morning ... well! During the night there had been a dust storm and the next morning the dust was everywhere.

Now this wasn't ordinary dust that makes you go “achoo! achoo! achoo!”. This was “me” dust which makes you go “me! me! me!”

It turns ordinary generous people into selfish, grasping, demanding people who are out to get what they want and watch out anyone who stands in their way.

It's amazing what just a little of this special dust can do when it blows up somebody's nose. There's always some of it around but on *this* night large amounts of “me” dust blew in from the east.

The next morning at breakfast tables all over town the same thing happened. Children, and even some adults, were squabbling over the breakfast cereals!

“I got it first” ... “No I did” ... “There's just enough here for me so get lost.”

In many families the squabbling ended up on the floor and weeks later they were still cleaning up rice bubbles and corn flakes.

I won't say what happened on the school bus that morning – you'd be too shocked!

At school they were going to have a film. It wasn't one of those boring educational films. It was in fact a very funny comedy that was only being shown because one of the teachers had a small part in it and the children had been looking forward to it for weeks.

Now it was a special honour on these occasions to be the one chosen to climb up on the window ledges and pull down the long blinds to make the room dark enough.

But on this day when the teacher asked who would like to do it there was a chorus of “me! me! me!” all over the room and a great wave of children surged towards the windows, pushing, shrieking, climbing over each other. Dozens of grasping hands reached for the blinds and yes ... the blinds were pulled down. Right on top of them all! For a moment it looked like the ocean – the blinds bobbed up and down like waves as the children scrambled from underneath.

It was clear there would be no films *that* day.

Lunch was a disaster but because the children were outside there was not too much broken.

The afternoon was sport and the school rugby team was expected to beat the visiting team from the next town.

But the visitors had never played a game like the one they played that day. They won 66-3. Every time the home team got hold of the ball they were jumped on by all their team mates. Everyone in the home team wanted to be the one to score the try. They kicked and screamed and wrestled with each other desperately trying to get the ball.

All the visitors had to do was to keep at a distance and soon the ball would roll out from the heap of struggling bodies that was the home team. The home team didn't even notice that the ball they were fighting over was no longer there!

The visitors could take their time and stroll up to the try line and score. It was only when the whistle went the home team realised they no longer had possession.

Yet they didn't learn. It happened over and over again. Each of the home team was playing as an individual instead as part of a team. The boy who scored the only goal for the home team was elated. So what if his team was thrashed. *He* was the only one in his team to score.

The bus trip back to school was uneventful because the bus didn't turn up. The driver had decided that it was such a lovely afternoon he would go for a swim in the river.

Unfortunately the garbage men had got there first. They wanted to go to the races in the next town so to save time they dumped their load in the river rather than taking it back to the depot.

They didn't get to the races, though, because the bus didn't turn up.

Everybody in the town that day acted thoroughly selfishly.

Dinner that night was a riot. In one family the father came home with an ice-cream for each of his family. But he'd chosen 6 different flavours and the squabbling about who should get what lasted so long that the ice-

creams melted. The cat and the dog had a great time under the table licking up the mess. *They* were happy to share because they knew there was enough for both of them.

With much grumbling and bickering they all eventually went to bed. That night the wind changed and swept most of the "me" dust away, so the next morning there was only a little of it around. Everyone went back to being kind and unselfish most of the time but they'll never forget the day when the whole town put self before others.

Here in Eastwood, as in most places, there's always a bit of "me" dust around. You won't see it but you *can* see its effect on people. Whenever you come across somebody acting selfishly, thinking only of himself or herself, you will know there is some of it around.

And if you feel you're about to say or do something selfish and to sneeze "me! me! me!" just put your finger under your nose until the urge to be selfish goes away. Every time you do this you'll make the world a better place to live in.

THE CRANE DRIVER

Hands up those of you who have ever been to see your father's work, or your mother's work. Jennifer's father was a crane driver and one day she had the chance to see her father at his work. Now she knew that he was a crane driver but she'd always pictured a small crane.

The only crane she'd ever seen was the one on the back of the tow-truck when their car had broken down and somehow she imagined her father standing beside the little crane, pulling the levers.

But ... Mr McPherson, her father, worked on the docks down near Pymont. And he operated one of those giant cranes that are used to unload big ships.

Well one day her mother took Jenny to see the crane that her father operated. They stood on the wharf with the noise of whistles and shouting and machines whirring.

“There's Daddy up there”, said mother pointing up to the sky. Far above, among all the iron beams, was a little cabin (well it seemed tiny to them) and an arm waving down at them.

Jenny gasped as she saw her father and his crane, pick up huge boxes, trucks and even a diesel engine, from out of the ship's hold and place them on the wharf.

There were men running around in all directions, waving their arms and blowing whistles, connecting and disconnecting huge steel cables and heavy chains. But the most important person was her father, the crane driver.

“Daddy's the king of the whole wharf”, she said proudly.

It was funny to think that the same person who passed the sugar that morning over breakfast was now in charge of passing a huge diesel locomotive from ship to shore.

Now it was against the rules for anyone except the driver to go up into the cabin of the crane, but when the loading and unloading was finished for the day, father thought he'd break the rules and take Jenny for a ride in the cab.

It was such a big crane she had to go up in a small lift to where her father was. The arm of the crane

towered above them in the cab, and there was mother far below on the wharf, patiently waiting.

The cabin wasn't as small as it had seemed from the ground and it was full of dials and lights and levers. Father pressed a button and pulled a lever and the cab, and the whole crane above, started turning. Then another lever and Jenny could see the arm of the crane starting to lower.

Jenny's eyes were wide open. This was her father and he was so clever and important to be driving such a huge and complicated crane. Of course she had known him all her life but somehow that day she saw him in a new way. With his crane he was able to pick up huge pieces of machinery and dangle them in the air just as easily as he would pick her up and dangle her on his knee.

He was not just her dear father who lived with her in the little brick house in Miller Street. He was Mr McPherson, the crane driver, who from his cab high above the wharf, controlled everything.

Many years ago some men went up into the mountains with somebody they had known very well for

some time. They had had meals with him, and had travelled with him and had worked with him.

Though they knew that he was somehow special, they just called him by his first name, and most of the time they just thought of him as just a good friend that they worked for. But when they got to the top of this mountain, something strange happened which made them realise that he was not just Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son. He was also Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.

He appeared to them in dazzling white and there were bright lights shining all around them which almost blinded them, and the prophets Elijah and Moses appeared there also. This was the great event we call the transfiguration.

The disciples wanted to stay there forever, it was so wonderful, just as Jenny didn't want to go back down from the crane, she was having so much fun. But Jesus led the disciples back down to continue their work of teaching and healing. He knew it was not good for them to stay up there. They had to come down.

But they never forgot that experience on the mountain top and from then on thought about Jesus in a

much more special way, just as Jenny also never forgot her experience up in the crane and from that day she thought of her father in a more special way.

It's a magical thing that Jesus, who is your own very special friend, is also the most important person who has ever lived - far more important than Walt Disney or Kevin Rudd or Barrack Obama or Albert Einstein.

Jesus is the Son of the God of the whole niverse and yet he is also your own special friend who knows more about you and cares more for you than you do yourself.

Now as a child you might feel that you don't know as much about Jesus as an adult does. There are probably many of parts of the bible you don't understand. You probably couldn't tell me what justification by faith means. You might not be able to recite the Apostle's Creed, and even if you could you might not be able to understand all of it.

Yet, who do you think knew more about what sort of person Mr McPherson was - Jennifer, or one of the wharfies who worked with him? No doubt about it, Jennifer did. She wouldn't have known the first thing about driving a crane or unloading ships. But he was her father and she knew him really well.

Well, its just the same about Jesus. As a child you might still have a lot to learn about the bible. You mightn't know as much about what Jesus did when He was on earth, as grown ups. But you can know Him, as a friend, in your heart, just as well as your parents, or your Sunday School teacher or a minister.

THE MILLER BY THE SEA

Once upon a time there lived a miller who lived in a very old-fashioned country where they still use windmills to grind corn to make flour.

Now miller Turnwheel, for that was his name, used to live high in the mountains by a fast-flowing stream. The water ran down with considerable force, turning his wheel which turned his machinery which turned his huge grinding wheel which ground his corn till it became smooth, fluffy, fine flour.

The mill was so high in the mountains that it was very cold, and icy winds would blow down from the snowy peaks above and whistle around the yard that surrounded the mill and the mill house.

Mrs Turnwheel, the miller's wife, suffered greatly from the cold. She was always sniffing and the damp winds did terrible things to her arthritis.

So one day, at the suggestion of Mr Wheeze the doctor, the miller decided to dismantle his mill and move it down-stream near to the place where the river widens out into the sea. The weather would be much milder there, he thought, and kinder to Mrs Turnwheel's

arthritis. Besides, there was a little town close by, which he thought might be nice for Mrs Turnwheel.

So he moved his mill close to the sea. But it wasn't until he rebuilt the mill and was testing it that he discovered something very curious about the flow of the water. During some parts of the day the water flowed downstream, as it should, quite quickly and the wheel turned strongly and ground his corn.

But then the flow would stop and then start up again in the opposite direction - the water flowed upstream! And because his machinery was not designed to go backwards, he had to shut down the mill at these times.

Then several hours later, the water would begin to surge down-stream again and once again he was able to grind his corn.

This starting and stopping was very inconvenient. It meant that he was only able to grind his corn half the time. It wouldn't have mattered if the idle hours were always at night, but they weren't. Often he would have to sleep through the day and get up in the middle of the night to grind. He was at the mercy of the flow of the water.

Now you can probably guess what caused the river to constantly change its mind as to which direction it was to flow. This surge of water, in at some times, out at others, was because the water was being driven by a great engine in outer space - the one we call the moon.

You probably don't think of the moon as an engine. It looks so peaceful and beautiful and shiny. Engines are usually noisy and ugly and dirty. But the moon, as it goes round the earth, is a mighty engine that pulls the waters of the earth with its long gravitational arms. The moon is the cause of that great miracle we call the tides.

But the miller was a simple, who had lived his whole life in the mountains, and he knew nothing of tides. To him this was just a tiresome problem which he had to solve.

First he asked the town policeman, Constable Stopp.

“Constable Stopp”, he said, “you direct the traffic in the centre of town on market day. Are you able to stop the waters coming back the wrong way in the river?”

“Well, no,” said Constable Stopp. “It is true that I can control the traffic on market day but that's because if any driver refuses to do what I say I can simply lock him

up in the town jail. But I'm not sure I could lock up all that water! I'd like to help you but I can't. Why don't you go to see Mr Plugg, the plumber. It seems to me that it's a plumbing problem and he might be able to suggest something.

So the miller went off to see Mr Plugg.

“Mr Plugg,” he said, “I know that you are very clever with water and Constable Stopp told me that once when the water started gurgling back up through the plughole of his bath, you told him it was a blocked drain and you fixed it. Now I think there must be some sort of blockage in the river. Could you fix it?”

“I'm sorry,” said Mr Plugg. “It's true that I can fix a blocked drain. But to do that I replaced the blocked part of the drain with a new piece of pipe and I haven't got a pipe as big as the river. So I can't see how I can help. Perhaps you could ask Sir Oswald Canute who lives in that big house on top of that hill.

So the miller went up to the fine old house and asked Sir Oswald Canute if he could make the waters behave themselves.

“Oh yes”, he said, “I have heard that story about my ancestor King Canute. He had his throne carried down to the water's edge as the tide was coming in and he held up his hands and commanded the waters to come no closer. But it is recorded that he got very, very wet. So there's no family secret or special power I have over the tides.”

The miller could think of nobody else he could ask so he just had to accept that he could work only when the tide was going out, even if that happened to be the middle of the night. And he had to rest when the tide was coming in, even if that was in the middle of the day.

The miller took it for granted that the river should always flow in the same direction because that is all he had known in the mountains. The tide flowing out is like giving and the tide flowing in is like receiving. And both are very important. If nobody gives we could never receive and if nobody receives we could never give.

Now mothers tend to do a lot of giving, but Mother's Day is a day when we turn the tide around – when we think of what we can give back.

I'm not thinking of the steam irons and slippers that we see in all the advertising at this time of the year. I'm

not even thinking of the way some of us will say, “put your feet up Mum, we're doing the cooking today.”

A gift far more valuable than these is the gift of appreciation and thankfulness.

Some mothers are very hard to buy gifts for but acknowledgments of what they have done for us is something no mother ever gets enough of.

Appreciation and thankfulness is the flowing back of the tide — a sign that we are not taking someone for granted.

That someone need not be our mother. This truth is bigger than Mother's Day. Many who are not mothers or fathers have given of themselves in serving others and continue to do so.

But wider even than the truth that God needs our gift of thankfulness and acknowledgment to complete the giving cycle.

It's funny to think of God wanting gifts from us. Yet there it is. He wants our gift of adoration and praise.

Not because He needs to be told how wonderful He is. The pleasure a mother gets from being told “Gee

Mum, that was a nice meal” isn't because she needs to be told how good she is. It's simply the pleasure of knowing that the meal has been appreciated – the satisfaction of having the giving cycle completed.

God wants our adoration and praise in the same way. He doesn't have a swelled head that needs to be told how wonderful He is. But He does yearn — more than any mother — for us to appreciate the gifts that He showers upon us.

THE ORANGE PIP

Hullo there. I'm a seed. You'll need to come a little closer if you want to see me because I'm not very big. I'm an orange seed, but my friends call me Pip. Sometimes they call out "hullo Pipsqueak" but I don't like that. I'm a seed not a squeak.

Anyway, I was born in this orchard here inside a big juicy orange. Oh, it was a cosy, moist world but eventually the time came for me to go out into the big wide world. Farmer Alfredo opened up the orange in which I lived and I spilled out with all my brothers and sisters into a big box.

So here I am with lots and lots of family – not just brothers and sisters but cousins of uncles of nephews of grandmothers. There must be thousands of us orange seeds in this box. I wonder what Farmer Alfredo intends to do with us. I've heard that some seeds are used for bread making. I should like to be made into a loaf of bread. That would make me feel really useful.

One of my cousins said that they don't use orange pips in bread. He may be right, but as he's only a seed he doesn't know much.

Oh, here comes Alfredo now. He's picked up the box and taken us out into the bright sunshine. I wonder where he's taking us. He's taking us out into the fields. Perhaps that's where the bakery is. But now he's put the box down onto the ground. I can't quite see what's going on.

One of my cousins has fallen out of the box so he can see what Alfredo is doing and he's calling it out to the rest of us.

Alfredo has a big steel thing with a wooden handle. It's flat at the end and he's sticking it into the ground and dirt is coming out. Oh, one of my cousins says it's a spade. What's that? He's digging in the dirt with his spade.

What's he doing now? He seems to be digging small deep holes. What on earth could they be for? Do you think he's forgotten all about us and is digging holes for fence-posts?

No, he's picked the box up and is carrying it over to the holes. Oh no, he's just picked me up and he's dropped me into one of these holes. Thud! I've hit the bottom of the hole. This can't be how you make bread.

Oh no, he's covering up the hole with dirt. I can't see! I can't breathe! I think I'm going to die!

I can't tell whether it's night or day. I can't see anything – I can't hear anything. I must be dead.

Oh no, I feel all wet! I hope I haven't wet my pants. No, of course not silly. Seeds don't wear pants. No, the water's coming from above my head. Oh dear, I'm getting all wet. What a terrible thing is happening to me. I'm not just a dead seed – I'm a muddy dead seed.

I can't tell how long I've been dead but for some time I've felt rather strange. Is this what death is like? I feel as though I'm a lot bigger than I was. And I seem to be able to move my fingers. Silly me, seeds don't have fingers. But yet I seem to be able to move something that feels a bit like fingers.

Being dead is so strange. I don't like it one little bit. Now one of my fingers is getting rather warm. Oh no! I know what's happening. Farmer Alfredo has decided not to bury me after all. He's going to burn me up in a fire!

But wait. My finger is nice and warm but it's not getting any hotter. What can this mean? And now

another finger feels warm. Oh my, what's happening to me?

Now it's not so completely black as it was. I seem to be able to see some faint light. Oh, now it's getting brighter and ... yes, I think I can make out a colour. It's sort of green. Wait. That green thing has started to get edges. It seems to have a shape. Yes, it's shaped like a leaf.

It is a leaf – a leaf that's very close to me. Get away from me leaf!

Most curious. When ever wiggle my finger the leaf wiggles too. If I stop, the leaf stops. It's almost as if that leaf is part of me. But I'm only a pip. Orange pips don't have leaves. They don't have fingers either. Being dead is more strange than I'd ever imagined. It's as if I'm getting a whole new body. Is this what death is like?

Of course it was a new body. That seed, whose name is Pip, had been planted by Farmer Alfredo and now, after many weeks, and with the help of careful watering and fertilising, Pip had started to grow into a small orange tree. After some years he grew into a tree – small, but big enough for young children to climb into

his branches. He was so happy to hear their laughter. “I’m much more useful than if I’d been made into bread,” he told himself.

And some time later he began to grow orange coloured balls on his arms. I think they’re called “oranges” and the arms are called “branches”.

Pip had died, and was buried in the ground. But he came alive again with a different body. He was no longer an orange pip – he was now an orange tree.

Jesus said, “An orange seed remains no more than a single pip unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces a whole orange tree.” Death is not the end of something. It is a beginning – the beginning of a new life.

STELLA, HALLEY'S COMET

Stella was a star who wanted to be part of a constellation. But none of the constellations wanted anything to do with her. You're too faint they said, and besides you're too restless — you can't sit still long enough. We don't want our constellations to be blurred.

For it was true that Stella was always on the move and she regularly disappeared for long periods of time.

One day, when she was near the constellation of Orion, she asked some of the other stars whether she could be a part of Orion's Belt.

“I could be the buckle on the Belt of Orion,” she said.

“A fine buckle you'd make,” they said, “you'd go wandering off into space and Orion's pants would fall down.”

And they all chuckled to each other at the ridiculous idea of Stella being part of their constellation.

“Perhaps I could be the tail of the fish,” said Stella to the stars in the constellation of Pisces the Fish. “I’ve got very long hair which could be the tail.”

The stars of Pisces pulsed to each other and said, “Stella wants her hair to be the tail of Pisces the fish! can you imagine? Just look at the way she swims about in space – head first. Can you imagine a fish swimming tail first?”

For it was true. Whenever she travelled away from the sun she did so head first, with the filaments of her hair streaming out in front of her.

One day she spoke to the few stars that made up the smallest constellation in the sky — the Southern Cross. “You could surely do with another star in your constellation,” she said. “My hair could point towards the centre of the cross.”

“The trouble with you,” they said, “is that you spend the whole day sitting in front of the sun, drying your hair. You’d never be able to point in the right direction.”

Stella went around the other 85 constellations but without success. In fact most of them simply ignored

her. They'd just look right through her as if she was invisible. She seemed fated to always be a lone star.

One day, an astronomer by the name of Ed, called out to her as he peered at her through his telescope.

“Hullo, why are you looking so sad?” he asked.

“I'm a lone star that nobody wants in their constellation,” she replied.

“But you're not a star,” said Ed. “Don't you know that you're a comet. That's why you're so restless. Comets always go walkabout for long periods of time.”

“Then my hair...?” she asked.

“That's just the tail that every comet has, streaming out in the solar wind. What's your name my pretty little comet?”

“Stella. What's yours?”

“Ed. Well Stella, I'd like to give you another name because Stella means star and you're not a star. Would you mind if I called you after me?”

“Hm! Ed's comet. I'm not sure that I particularly like the sound of that.”

“No, no. I'd call you after my last name. How does Halley's comet sound?”

So Halley's Comet she became. And what a difference it made to her. At last she belonged.

“I'm a comet you know,” she'd call out to Saturn and Jupiter as she swept past. “I'm Halley's comet.”

Of course the next time she returned to the vicinity of the earth 76 years later, Halley wasn't there to greet her. But other astronomers were there, waiting for her to return.

No more would she be an unwanted piece of the solar system. She belonged!

Oh she wasn't the biggest, most important heavenly body, and when she was off on her long journeys to the distant parts of space most people forgot all about her. But when she was due to return to our skies there were astronomers waiting for her return. And the excitement spread until for a few weeks the whole world was caught up in comet fever.

They'd look up and say to each other. "Look up there, streaking across the sky. That's Halley's comet."

Until she was discovered by Halley, Stella was lonely, desperately lonely. Lonely people are those who think they don't belong anywhere. They feel they could come and go without anybody noticing, without anyone caring.

I remember once seeing a musical called Chicago. One of the characters called himself Mr Cellophane. He said that wherever he went, people would just look straight through him as if he wasn't there, as if he was quite invisible.

In fact when he signalled to the orchestra that he was ready to begin his big song they just ignored him. Eventually he had to sing it unaccompanied.

How many cellophane people do you know? How many people make you think of Glad Wrap. You'll have to look hard to see them.

What about at school? The boy or girl who always eats their lunch off by themselves. That new kid in the street that nobody knows and nobody wants to know. After all, you don't need any new friends. What about

that old lady across the road. She hasn't got any family and the only friendship she gets all day is when people smile at her as they walk past.

These are the people who are just waiting to be discovered. Perhaps, like Halley, you can be the one to discover them. Get out your telescope and look around you.

THE THREE WISE CAMELS

We all know the story of the three wise men. They came from the east on their camels and followed the star until it stood over the manger at Bethlehem.

But among camels in the hot, dry, sandy parts of the world, the story is told from a different perspective – from the point of view of camels. Let me tell you how they tell the story as they relax around the cool waters of the oasis after a long and dusty ride across the desert. I'm not one hundred per cent sure if it's a true story because I didn't get it directly from the camel's mouth. But then a camel has never been known to tell a lie.

There came from the east three wise camels in search of Him who was born King of the Jews. Many say that we camels are incredibly stupid, but of course we all know otherwise. It's very clever to seem not to understand when we don't want to obey orders. Well, these three camels were the wisest of all us camels.

Their riders were called clever men – I don't know that I'd call them wise, but that's the name that men gave them. They studied the stars and they discovered that at this time the planet Jupiter had entered the constellation of Aries and remained there. To all astrologers Aries, the ram, was the symbol of the Jews

and Jupiter was the sign of a king. The eastern sky symbolized birth so the fact that Jupiter at this time was visible in the eastern sky at sunrise, in the constellation of Aries, told them that the King of the Jews had been born.

The story is often told that the star was like a huge, bright beacon that hovered above the heads of these men and all they had to do was to follow it till it stopped right above the manger. If only it had been this easy! If it had then the riders on the backs of the three wise camels wouldn't have had to go to Herod to ask, "where is he that is born King of the Jews?" And if a bright star was visible above the stable Herod wouldn't have had to ask these men to report back to him. His soldiers would have been able to find it for themselves.

No, the star was something special that happened in the sky that only the learned astrologers could interpret. It told them *what* had happened, and in which country. But they weren't able to work out from the stars exactly where to find the baby Jesus. It was the acute hearing of the three wise camels that brought the wise men to Jesus.

You'll know how well we can hear. Our ears are small and are lined with fur to filter out the sand but we can hear the sound of the many hooves on the sand of a

camel caravan many dunes away. Well these three wise camels had miraculous hearing and by putting their heads up when the wind blew across the deserts from far-off Judea they could hear the sounds made by the baby Jesus.

Now these weren't the sounds of a baby crying because we're told that "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes", although I hear that as an adult he wept from compassion. But no, these sounds that drifted over the vast distances were the sounds of the baby Jesus gurgling. Jesus gurgled with the joy that God brings to the world, in a way that only a King can gurgle. This unmistakable sound of joy was the sound that the camels could hear, and they followed that sound, carrying their riders with them.

Those three wise camels had come to worship Jesus and as they reached the stable they knelt down in adoration before him. We camels, as you know, are one of the few animals that can kneel, and this accounts for our knobby knees. Well the three wise riders got off their camels and, because they'd seen us kneel, they got the idea and so they also kneeled.

Those three wise men had come, bearing gifts to the new-born king. One was the king of Sheba. He'd

brought a golden crown and this he gave it to Jesus in acknowledgement of his kingship.

Another was the high priest of Ephah and he had a jeweled box containing pieces of frankincense. These yellow lumps were burnt in the ceremonies of worship in the temple of Ephah, giving off holy fragrance. In giving this to Jesus he was acknowledging that Jesus was worthy of true worship.

The third rider was the chief embalmer of the Egyptian Pharaohs. He had brought, as a gift to Jesus, a jar of precious myrrh. Myrrh was a sweet-smelling substance that was used to prepare the dead Pharaohs for burial. This gift was an acknowledgement that the mission for which Jesus had come into the world was to die for the sins of man.

The trouble was these three gifts weren't very practical. What does a baby, lying in a manger, want with gold, frankincense and myrrh on a cold and wintry night. Luckily the three wise camels brought some more useful gifts.

The first wise camel was Harry the Hairy Camel. He allowed Joseph to comb off lots of loose hair from his

back and Mary was able to make a little camel's hair blanket for the baby Jesus.

The second wise camel was Molly. She gave some fresh, warm camel milk for the baby Jesus. But the gift of the third camel, Bert, was perhaps the most useful gift of all.

You see it was a cold December night and the family had no fuel with which to make a fire. As all you camels know our hard, dry, droppings are used as a fuel in the desert and so Bert gave a quantity of droppings so that Joseph could light a small fire to keep the baby Jesus warm.

When he was older, Jesus really learnt to appreciate the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh because of what they stood for. But on that cold winter's night when he was thirsty and cold I'm sure he appreciated more the gifts of hair, milk and pooh from the three wise camels.

TWO CAMELS TAKE A CRUISE

I'm one of the two camels that sailed with Noah during the Great Flood and I'd like to tell you what it was like. The first I heard about it was when Mrs Camel and I received this invitation by dove-post.

It said: "Noah, and his wife Joan, and his three sons and their wives cordially invite Mr and Mrs Camel to a cruise to celebrate the launching of their big ship, the Ark, which they have just finished building. The cruise will be held aboard the Ark and all food will be provided. You are advised to pack some wet weather gear as the forecasts are for a very heavy rainstorm. Just follow the bird who brought you this invitation."

"What's 'rain'?" Mrs Camel asked. "I've never heard that word before."

"It must be something like sand," I said. "You know, the sand storms we get sometimes when the wind blows from the east and you have to close up your nostrils. But I don't know what he means by 'wet weather gear'."

So we packed the few things we thought we'd need and then followed the little bird until we came to this

large desert. In the middle of the desert was a huge wooden boat. It was over 50 camel-lengths long and it had three decks. The strange thing, though, was that it was propped up on dry land. There was no sea, no river, no lake anywhere to be seen.

“It doesn’t look as if we’re going very far on this so-called cruise,” I commented to Mrs Camel.

But although there was no water, there were plenty of other animals. They had also been invited. I recognised Mr and Mrs Elephant and a couple of tall giraffes. But there were many other strange animals I’d never see before, including one pair that just hopped about all over the place.

“How ever is Mr Noah going to squeeze the elephants and the giraffes into one of those cabins?” Mrs Camel asked me.

“I suppose he’ll have to put them up on the roof,” I said. “But why he’d want to invite them I don’t know. Elephants and giraffes aren’t any use to anybody. You are a she-camel and so you can give Noah milk and my fur can be made into cloth to keep him warm. But what good is a stiff-necked giraffe?”

“Yes,” she replied, “they think they’re above the rest of us, with their noses stuck up in the air.”

“That’s true,” I said, “and I’m sure with those two elephants aboard we’ll be in danger of tipping over. I don’t know what Noah was thinking of when he invited them.”

“He should have just invited more camels,” said my wife. “We don’t take up as much space as elephants and giraffes. And besides we don’t need much water. I think he’s going to run short of water for all these animals, stuck out here on this silly boat in the middle of a desert.”

“Yes,” I said, “you know how much water those elephants drink. I’m sure he’ll run out of water before the day’s out. Still, that’s not our problem, dear. We had a good drink before we came and that should last us a few weeks.”

We walked up the long ramp and were shown to our cabins. We must have been one of the last to get on board because not long after this, the ramp was pulled up.

“I don’t think I’m going to like this cruise”, my wife complained. “We’re stuck here in this dingy cabin that we have to share with two horses, six chickens and a couple of pigs. They all smell different to us. I don’t think I’m going to get any sleep.”

“And there’s even a couple of spiders making a web in the corner,” I said. “We’re not going to getting any privacy either.”

My dear wife was beginning to wish she’d never come. “I think I want to go home.”

“I’m not sure we can,” I said. “They’ve pulled up the ramp. Let’s just see what happens.”

Well pretty soon the sun went down and it got very dark. Just then there was a loud noise. It sounded like a huge palm tree cracking and plunging to the ground only it was much, much louder. And then there was a sudden bright light, as if the sun had come out for a second and then went back in again. And then, through the small window of our cabin I saw something I’d never seen before. Water was coming out of the sky! It was as if a river had somehow got lifted up into the heavens and was pouring its water onto the ground. I’d never seen anything like it in all my life!

All this time the loud cracking noises and the flashing lights continued. Mrs Camel and I were a bit scared but nowhere near as scared as the hens. They were cackling loudly and running all over the cabin as if they'd had their heads chopped off. The horses were whinnying and stamping their hooves on the floor. The only animals that didn't seem to be concerned were the pigs – they just kept on eating – and the spiders.

Now I could understand why Noah brought horses and chickens along. Humans can ride on a horse and they eat chickens. And of course camels are the most useful creatures of all. But what's the use of pigs and spiders? You can't eat pigs, or at least Noah's people were told they weren't supposed to. And I don't know if he was allowed to eat spiders but you wouldn't get much of a meal out of those two. Noah would have done much better if he'd invited only camels. You can ride on a camel much better than on a horse – especially across a sandy desert.

“I think I want to go home, Humpy,” said my dear wife. “Do go and see if there's any way of getting off. Perhaps we could just jump.”

So I made my way to the upper deck where the ramp had been and as I did so I noticed that the floor was

moving gently, from left to right and back again. It was hard to keep steady on my feet.

When I got up on deck I found out why. We were no longer in the middle of a large desert. By some sort of strange magic it was now a huge lake and the Ark was floating, bobbing up and down. And all this time the river in the sky was emptying itself in cascades of water onto the deck. I didn't know how quickly to get back inside. I went back down to our cabin.

“I'm afraid we can't get off, dear. We're in the middle of a lake and we seem to be under some giant waterfall.” I'd never seen a waterfall, but an old camel who'd travelled a lot told me about it once. I later found out that what was happening outside was to be called “rain”. The loud noises were “thunder” and the bright flashes of light were called “lightning”. These words had to be made up, you know, because this was the first time rain or thunder or lightning had ever happened in the world. We sometimes had mists and dew but that was nothing like the buckets of water that were now dropping down from the sky.

Well it rained (I soon got used to this new word “rain”) and it rained, for forty days and forty nights and the water got deeper and deeper. And the Ark floated on

top. Life on board was pretty uncomfortable but we weren't complaining any more. I thought of all the poor camels who hadn't been invited. They'd be drowned by now. I suppose all the other elephants and hens and spiders were drowned too but ... well ... they're not so important because they're different to camels.

You see, when God made the world he made it for us camels. He only created human beings so that they could look after us, as Noah was doing right now. Camels can do lots of things better than man, but one thing they can't do is make boats. And God saw that if he was going to make man, for the camels, he'd better make other animals to feed man so that man wouldn't have to eat camels. Ah, but then God seemed to get carried away creating just for the sake of creating – all sorts of weird creatures that were no good to camels or men. That was bad enough, but why Noah had to be so simple-minded as to try to *save* all those useless beasts I don't know.

This just goes to show that we camels are much cleverer than men. If we'd been able to build the Ark we'd have invited only camels – oh, and perhaps a couple of men to steer the boat. Why they call us the “ships of the desert” I don't know because we don't know one end of a boat from the other. Human beings

do come in handy sometimes. But all the other animals are quite, quite useless because ... well ... they're not like us – they're not as clever as camels and they don't know about boats, like Noah.

At one stage the rain was so hard that it came into the lower decks and started filling up the bottom of the boat. Noah did something that was very clever, for a human. He attached the elephants' trunks to long hoses and they sucked the water out of the bottom of the boat and blew it over the sides.

So I began to feel that perhaps it was a good thing that Noah had brought the elephants along. Perhaps there are three types of creatures worth saving – camels, men and elephants.

After a long, long time the rain stopped. Noah wanted to see if there was any dry land so he sent a small mole-rat up to the lookout at highest point of the Ark – that, of course was the head of one of the giraffes. Mm, perhaps giraffes could be useful sometimes, I suppose.

Then Noah sent out a raven but he never came back. He kept flying around until the water was completely gone down. So ravens are pretty useless. But then Noah sent out a dove and the dove came back. A week later

he sent the dove out again and this time the dove came back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. So there was dry land out there somewhere. Noah made a note of the direction he'd come from. Maybe doves have their uses, too.

Noah knew which direction to go to reach dry land. But how was he to get there? You see Noah had stupidly forgotten to provide any sails for the boat. He thought it didn't matter because all you had to do was to drift about until the water went down. But what if the Ark had drifted into the middle of the sea? The water might never go down!

Noah realised this eventually so he was desperate to find some way of harnessing the strong winds that had started blowing. First he needed a mast, but he'd left all his woodworking tools behind. These humans can be pretty dumb! Luckily he had a couple of beavers on board. They gnawed through some long timbers, that made up part of the upper deck, and made a couple of tall masts. The elephants managed to hoist them up. But now where could you get a sail?

Shem's wife had this bright idea of asking the spiders to weave a huge web. So the spiders wove all day and all night until there was an enormous web

stretching from one mast to the other. But the wind just blew right through the gossamer fibres. You can't make a sail out of cobwebs.

It was then that I got my brilliant idea. I got the rats to gnaw off my fur, and the fur of all the furry creatures on board. We then got the sparrows and all the little birds on board to take these tufts of fur and to weave them into the web as if they were making a giant nest.

Soon the wind started to collect in this improvised sail, but we were going off in the wrong direction. We needed a rudder. It was then that the couple of hopping creatures came hopping up and said, "We can hang onto the back of the Ark and use our strong tails to act as rudders." So this is what they did. And so we moved off in more or less the right direction.

After many days we landed on dry land and there was this wonderful coloured picture that God must have drawn in the sky, to celebrate.

Noah told us all to get off and go and have lots of little baby camels and baby kangaroos, and baby elephants and baby spiders so that we could repopulate the world. So, you see, by our brilliant idea of using fur for sails, we camels saved the world – though most of

the animals were so different to camels that they weren't worth saving. Oh yes, I suppose elephants and giraffes, and doves and kangaroos and spiders and a few other types of animals and birds do have their place.

But why God created pigs and why Noah was bothered to save them I still don't know. Perhaps the day might come when human beings would be allowed to eat pig meat. Then maybe even pigs would be useful.

God was very wise in creating many different animals of all shapes and sizes. They all have different gifts and are useful in many different ways. There's a community in the animal kingdom, just as there is in the human family.

Many children are quite different to you and it's very easy to believe that because they're different they're somehow less important. Some children have a different coloured skin. But they're our brothers and sisters in God's family. Some children are blind, or can't walk. But God loves them and has a purpose for them. Some children go to different types of schools or live in different types of housing or play different sports or like different sorts of music.

Some of God's children aren't children any more. They have wrinkles and walking sticks and talk about

things that happened a long time ago. But they're part of God's family too and are just as important as you who are young.

And when you get older, and have families of your own, you'll develop certain very strong views about the church, and the way this country should be run, and the sort of people your children ought to spend their lives with. It will be very easy to say, like the camel, that if someone is different to you then they must be wrong and if they're very different you should have nothing whatsoever to do with them.

Some people even say things like "if they're going to do that I'm leaving this church". But the Church is God's family. God created many different types of animals, many different types of human beings with many different ways of looking at his world.

Of course you should still work out what's right for you and what God wants you to do and not to be carried away by every new idea.

But remember that Jesus mixed with people very different to himself. He didn't run away from those whose lives were different from His. God wants us to be different from one another, yet love one another despite

those differences and, perhaps even *because* of those differences.

THE MONKEY WHO WANTED TO BE A BOY

I want to tell you a story about a monkey I once knew, called Miko. He lived in a far-off country called India, in the jungle, near a small town. He often walked through the streets, but the people just chased him away.

“Quick, catch that monkey,” they cried, and he had to run as fast as he could, back into the trees.

“Oh, I wish I was a person,” he said to himself, “then I could walk down the street without being chased away. How can I become a person?”

“Mr Elephant,” he said to his big friend with a long trunk, “I want to be a person. You’re the wisest animal in the jungle. What can I do to become a person?”

The elephant scratched his head with his trunk and thought for a long time. “I once wanted to become a person,” he said, “but I couldn’t find any clothes big enough to fit me. You can’t be a person if you don’t wear clothes!”

“That’s it,” thought Miko, “all I have to do is to find some clothes. I know I’m not very big but perhaps I might be able to find some little boy clothes. Then I could walk down the street and, instead of chasing me away, they would say, “oh what a nice little boy. What’s *your* name my little man?”

“Well, it might work,” said the elephant, somewhat doubtfully. He actually thought Miko would look ridiculous in little boy clothes, but he was too polite to say so.

So Miko ran off to the river’s edge, where the mothers of the town would wash their clothes and lay them out to dry in the sun. He crept up to a rock and, when they were looking the other way, and there was a little pair of blue shorts and a T-shirt that had a picture of Bob the Builder on it. They had been in the sun all morning and were now almost completely dry. So Miko took the clothes, and put them on. Like Goldilocks and the three bears, they were *just* right.

Miko didn’t bother with shoes or socks, because the little boys of the village always ran around in bare feet. So off he went into the centre of town, pretending to be a little boy. He even tried to whistle, because that’s what

little boys do, but no sound came out except for a few shrieks.

“Look at that ridiculous monkey, wearing clothes,” they said, “let’s catch him!”

So, poor Miko had to run away again, as fast as he could. He went back to Mr Elephant. “It’s no use,” said Miko, “I need something more than just little boy clothes.”

“Well, of course,” said the elephant, “you must be able to talk like people if you want to be a person. Go to the edge of the village and listen to the people talking, and see if you can make the same sounds.”

“Of course,” said Miko, “if I could talk the way they do they’d know I wasn’t a monkey.”

So that night he went and sat in the trees at the edge of the village. He looked through the leaves and saw a large group of people, in a clearing, all talking to one another. “I’ll just listen,” he said to himself, “and I’ll learn to talk like them.”

But soon the talking stopped, and Miko heard some music. The people were all looking at something at the edge of the clearing. Miko moved to another branch so that he could see what it was that they were looking at. It was a house. But the house had lifted off the ground and was starting to turn around and around. There was a little girl at one of the windows and she looked very scared. The next moment he was looking inside the house and he could see that the little girl was wearing red shoes.

Have you ever seen the film the Wizard of Oz? Well this was an open-air picture show, and everyone was watching the Wizard of Oz. Miko was fascinated and he settled back on his branch and watched.

Now if you've ever seen The Wizard of Oz you'll know that the little girl's name was Dorothy. Her house had been blown away by a very strong wind that goes round and round, and eventually she landed in a strange country called Oz. There she met a scarecrow, who had no brains, a cowardly lion and a tin man who had no heart.

“I've got it,” said Miko to himself. “To be a person I have to find courage, a heart, and a brain.” He ran off to tell Elephant.

“Well, it might work,” said the elephant somewhat doubtfully, “it’s worth a try.”

“Where would I find some courage, a heart and a brain?” asked Miko. “Would I have to go to the land of Oz?”

“No, you might find those things on the top of that far-off mountain.” He didn’t really think Miko would find anything there, but as it would take Miko a long time to get there and back he thought he’d get some peace for a few days if he sent him there. Elephants are not unkind, but you have to remember that they hate being asked ridiculous questions all the time.

So Miko went off, and with much effort, after two days of walking and climbing, he reached the top of the mountain. Now I wonder if you can guess what he found there, nestled in between two rocks. It was an eagle’s eyrie. That’s the nest that the eagle builds in a high place. And in that nest were two things. One of them you’d expect to find in an eagle’s eyrie. It was a large egg, and the eagle was sitting on it, waiting for it to hatch. But the other was the last thing you’d expect to find in an eagle’s nest. It was a little, pink, human baby.

What the baby was doing there I can only guess. My guess is that the eagle had swooped down and *stolen* the baby from its mother. And why had she done this? My guess is that she thought that when the egg hatched the little baby eagle would need some fresh meat.

The baby was crying, not because it knew that it was intended to be the baby eagle's first dinner – she didn't know that. No, she was crying because she was cold, and she wanted her mother.

Miko said to himself, “this must not be”. Somehow I must carry that baby back down to her mother. But although the baby was only small, so was Miko, and he soon realised that there was no way he'd be strong enough to carry the baby down the mountain.

He said to himself, “what would elephant do?” Then he realised how silly the question was because there was no way an elephant could have climbed that mountain. “I have to think this out for myself,” he said to himself. In a single moment he not only thought of an idea, he also carried it out. Quick as a blink he took the egg from under the eagle and stood back a little way.

“Now listen very carefully, I will say this only once. I want you to fly the little baby back down to the village. I'll meet you there with your egg, and if the baby is

returned safely I'll give your egg back to you. But if you harm that baby, or attack me, I'll throw your egg over the edge.

The eagle could see that if she wanted to see her precious baby hatch, she had to return the human baby. So she agreed.

Now you all know that climbing down a mountain is a lot harder than climbing up. It's especially so if you're holding onto a fragile egg on the way down. The egg wasn't heavy, but eggs are smooth and don't come with handles. What's more, monkeys don't have back-packs they can put eggs into. Miko needed two hands to hold the egg, which left no hands to hold onto things to keep his balance.

Miko knew that if anything happened to that egg the eagle wouldn't keep the baby safe. Several times he nearly dropped the egg, and several times he nearly lost his footing and almost went over the edge. But, at last, he was safely down the mountain with the egg. The eagle was there with the baby. And the baby was crying, which was good, because if you hear a baby cry you usually know he's alright – just a bit hungry, or tired or something.

The exchange was made and the eagle flew off with her egg. Just then some people came along. Now you'd have thought they would have thanked Miko for going to so much trouble to rescue the baby. Not at all. They thought *he* was the one who had stolen the baby and they started throwing stones at him.

“Look at that bad monkey who has stolen that baby. Monkeys do that you know. Quick, throw stones at it and make it run away.”

So Miko had to run away. He ran and ran and at last he met up with his friend the elephant.

“I went to *so* much trouble to climb that mountain and it was all for nothing. I didn't find courage, I didn't find a heart, and I didn't find any brains. All I found was a baby, and look at all the thanks I got for rescuing it!”

Now Elephant was really quite wise when he put his mind to it. “You know,” he said, “I think I can tell you why you didn't find those things.”

“Why,” said Miko, “because they weren't there?”

“Not exactly,” said Elephant, “you couldn’t find them on the mountain because they were already there inside of you. You decided to rescue that poor baby, which shows that you already have a heart. You don’t need another one. And your most clever plan for rescuing the little one, why I wouldn’t have thought of that. So you see, you already had a brain – you didn’t need to go looking for another one. And you showed great courage in getting that egg safely down the mountain. There you see, you already had great courage.”

Miko thought about it and saw that elephant was right. “So I’m a person after all.”

“No, said elephant, “you’re still a monkey. But you’re the bravest, most intelligent, most caring monkey in the whole world. Some things you cannot change, other things you can. And some things don’t need changing – you just have to realise that you already have them.”

“So I’ll never be a person?” asked Miko.

“You’re a monkey. But there’s nothing wrong with that. You wanted to be a little boy. But you’re braver than a little boy, you have more heart than a little boy, and you are cleverer than a little boy.”

“And I can climb trees better than a little boy.”

“Exactly, you can climb trees much better than a little boy. So you’re much better off the way you are. Only, take off those clothes – they make you look ridiculous!”

THE WHOLE WORLD

There was once a time when people believed that the earth was flat, like this map here. But then people began to sail around the world and it became accepted that the earth is round like a ball. But this hasn't stopped some strange people still believing that the earth is flat – in fact there is society called the Flat Earth Society with its own web-site.

The flat earth people say that when you sail round the world you're only going around in a big circle on a flat earth. How could you prove them wrong?

Well, when my wife, Elisabeth sailed around the world in a cargo ship a few years ago, when she got home she had been away one less day than the number of days we counted that she'd been gone. You see, when you sail west you have to keep putting your clock back, so you have longer days. If it hadn't been for the fact that when you cross the International Date Line, going west, you skip a whole day it would have been very confusing. She would have thought it was Sunday while we would have insisted it was Saturday. If you don't understand this, ask your mum or dad when you get home.

People used to have strange ideas about God. In the Old Testament the people of Israel thought that God was their *own* God. He wasn't interested in people from other countries. They even used to pray that He would help them take over the lands of their enemies.

But then Jesus came to teach us that “God so loved the *whole* world that He gave His only Son ...” and He told us to go into the *whole* world to tell others about what He was doing for the whole world. There's a song, “He's got the whole world in His hands” which we'll sing later. But first I'm going to tell you a story.

Once there was a young girl called Savita, who came to Australia from India and she started going to Cheltenham Girls High. She became friends with an Australian girl called Sasha, and she asked her if she could join her at lunchtime.

“I'll have to ask my clique if you can join us,” said Sasha.

“What's a klikka?” asked Savita.

“It’s sort of a club. If you want to sit with us at lunch you have to belong to the clique. And if someone wants to join us we have to have a vote. I’ll let you know after school what they say.”

After school Savita spoke to Sasha.

“Sorry,” said Sasha. They said that we were all born in Australia and you were born somewhere else, so you’re different to us and you can’t join with us.”

Savita was very sad, and for the next few days she sat all by herself at the far end of the playground, eating her curry and Naan bread.

Then one day, at lunchtime, Sasha came up to her.

“I’ve just found out that I was born in America and came to Australia when I was very young.”

“So they kicked you out of the clique when they found out?” asked Savita.

“No, they said America was OK to be born in, but I told them that I’d rather not stay in the group.”

“We can form our own clique”, said Savita.

“And we won’t let anyone join us who was born in Australia” said Sasha.

“No,” said Savita, “it doesn’t matter where you were born.”

So they added extra members to their little group, over the next couple of weeks. A few were from Australia, Amimik was born in Greenland, and Cleopatra was born in Egypt.

“What was it like when you were a little girl in India,” June asked Savita.

“We lived near an elephant sanctuary and I used to ride an elephant bare back. An elephant’s hairs can be very prickly on your bare legs I can tell you!”

“What about you?” Sasha asked Amimik.

“Well we lived in a blue wooden house, but my Dad sometimes took my brother and me out onto the ice and taught us how to cut blocks of ice to make an igloo, in case we were out on the ice when a blizzard blows up.”

“We had nothing like that in Giza,” said Cleo, “but from the widow of the building where we lived you could look out onto the pyramids. I used to go there amongst all the tourists and sold postcards and cheap jewellery – one dollar for you lady.” They all laughed.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbour. And when asked by a Jew “who is my neighbour” he told a story about a good Samaritan, a man from another country – a country that the Jews thought poorly of. He taught us to accept not only people who are like us, but also people who are different to us. In fact he even taught us to love our enemies – but that’s a story in itself, for another time.

THE MAN WHO LOST GOD

Imagine a desolate landscape, featureless except for a few stunted trees and some brown thirsty grass trying bravely to stand upright. A hot wind blows across this scene but there is so little vegetation that its effect is visible only by the way it ruffles the cloak of a traveller who makes his way along the disused river bed.

Presently Godwin, for that is his name, sees a shepherd standing on one of the high banks and calls out to him.

“Hey there! I'm on my way to Heaven. Is this the way?”

“I am the Way”, said Jesus, the shepherd. “My Father is your Destination.”

“You don't seem to understand me”, said Godwin climbing up the bank. “You see, I recently died in the other world and being in the church, I'm headed for Heaven. Except that I seem to have lost my way, so can you show me how to get there?”

“Heaven is not a place”, said Jesus quietly. “Heaven is a relationship with my Father.”

“No such place!” cried Godwin in surprise. “Of course there's such a place.”

“My Father is the One whom you seek. I will take you to Him.”

“I don't mean to be rude my good fellow but I'm not looking for anybody, let alone a shepherd who doesn't know his way around, or his old father. I'm looking for a city - the New Jerusalem they call it. Perhaps you know it by that name? You enter it through huge golden gates covered in pearls and the streets are paved with gold.”

“You are mistaken”, said Jesus, “there is no such place. These are just ways of describing the wonderful joy that you will find when you are re-united with my Father for it was to be with Him that He created you. Let me take you to Him. Our house is just over that small hill.”

“Well, if you call it a house it must be a rather magnificent one. Oh yes, there's something in the Bible about a mansion with many rooms, isn't there? Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go - they're expecting me”.

Jesus looked at him in silence. His face revealed both great anger and great pity. Without a word he began to walk towards the hill. Godwin climbed the bank and caught up with him.

“You see, I did a lot for the church in the other world”, he chatted, quite ignorant of the shepherd's identity.

“I gave quite a bit of money to help the missionaries. Not that I did it all to get rewarded in Heaven of course. Still it's nice to know that what you've done has been recognised. I wonder if I'll get a room with a view? I suppose the whole place must be surrounded by beautiful gardens. It must be quite an oasis in all this desert!”

By this time they had reached the top of the hill and at the bottom of the shallow valley on the other side was a shepherd's hut surrounded by a low stone wall.

“I thought you said that the heavenly mansion was close by. All I can see is a little shed.”

Jesus pointed to the homely dwelling. “*That* is my Father's house.”

“I didn't ask to see *your* father's house”, said Godwin impatiently. “I want God's house.”

“But I am God's Son. This is our house”, said Jesus. His look of anger and pity became more intense. “Don't you know me?”

“Don't give me that! God wouldn't live in a little farm cottage like that! He created the whole universe so I'm sure he'd do better than that for himself.”

“My Father lives in many houses. He created you to live with us in this one. It's very comfortable. Won't you come home and sup with us?”

“If you really are the Son of God, why don't you command this cottage to become a golden palace?”

“Neither wood, nor stone, nor gold can satisfy your soul. Only God Himself can satisfy the deep longings that once you felt in your heart. I can see that you have managed to stifle them. Those desires that remain are shallow and self-contradictory and it is impossible for God to satisfy them.”

“But I thought God could do anything”, said Godwin.

“He was able to create the universe from a void. He brings forth life from a tiny seed. Through me He conquers sin and death. But He cannot satisfy the desires of one who thirsts for water yet cries out for sand to quench that thirst. I must return to my Father alone.”

Godwin turned his back on Christ and the little cottage. As he walked away he noticed that the sky began to glow red as in a sunset.

The red became deeper and more intense until the whole sky was as blood. A cry of agony split the stillness.

Terrified, Godwin ran back but the little cottage had gone and in its place was a figure nailed to a cross of wood.

Soon, both figure and cross disappeared and Godwin was left alone.

The sky grew darker and the air grew colder, and as the sky became quite black Godwin found that he could no longer feel the earth beneath his feet. Yet he had no sensation of falling. He was suspended in a void. He was alone in a dark, cold and empty universe.

THE GUIDED TOUR

“I'm afraid you'll have to move on now,” said the guide, “there's another party coming up behind.”

Simon had been propelled by the crowd for longer than he could remember and once again his group was moved on. He was not sure why he had come into this art gallery in the first place or indeed if he had ever come in. It seemed that as long as he could remember he had been part of this human wave which surged inexorably past paintings and sculptures that he didn't really understand.

“What's the point of it all?” he asked the man beside him. “I wish I'd never come.”

“Does there have to be a point to everything?” the man asked in return, “just have some fun. Look, there's another roulette table. Let's go over and give it a spin.”

There was a carnival atmosphere to this gallery for amongst the works of art there were hot dog stands, pin ball machines, fortune teller's booths and gaming tables. The crowds milled around them taking very little notice of the art. Simon and his new friend went up to the roulette table.

“Who's the old fellow in that picture?” Simon asked the croupier as he pointed to an oil portrait behind the table.

“Blowed if I know. I'd say he's been here longer than I have. I couldn't really say. There's a story that he's watched the wheel for so long that he knows which number will come up next. Come on now young man, what number will you lay your bet on?”

Soon they were hurried on once again until they came to a large room filled with statues that had been taken over by amusement booths. Almost no interest was being taken in the sculpture, except for one table where some of the small busts were being used for the game of hoopla.

“I'm afraid it's time to move on,” the guide announced, “those with ticket numbers ending in 1-9-7-9, please make your way out of the door over there.”

“That's me,” said Simon's friend, “see you!”

A number of people moved off. Simon went to the door and looked through. On the other side of the door was a staircase. A few of the people went up the stairs but most the crowd were headed off downstairs.

There was an old man standing in the doorway who had an uncanny resemblance to the man in the portrait. He was dressed as an artist and he had his box of colours and his brushes in his hand.

“What's upstairs?” Simon asked curiously.

“My studio is up there,” he replied, “and there are many many galleries where I keep my best work.”

“I wonder why not very many people want to go upstairs?” asked Simon.

“Perhaps because there aren't any amusement machines or sideshows there – just the art. As you can see down here very few people are taking much notice of the art. It grieves me. I've offered to explain it to them but they just stare at me and walk off.”

“Then why do you put all these distractions here?”

“Oh no, these things weren't here originally, they've been set up by some of the visitors.”

“And you allow it?”, asked Simon.

“For the present we do. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to keep moving. That's one of the few things we insist on. Come and I'll walk with you further.”

As they walked off, the artist explained that this was a cultural experiment. Visitors to the gallery were allowed to set up entertainments if they wished because the gallery director felt that art should not be forced on people. They had to be free to choose or reject it. Every so often the artist interrupted his explanation to talk about a painting and as they proceeded along the galleries and through the large halls Simon's eyes were opened to the beauty of the art.

“How can all these people ignore such beautiful works of art?”, asked Simon some time later as they stood before a large canvas. “I could stand here for hours staring at this. There's so much in it.”

“I'm afraid you must move on,” insisted the artist, “gallery rules.”

“But it's such a pity to be rushed.”

“I'm pleased you feel this way but I can't let you linger here just now. When you move upstairs you'll have all the time you need.”

“But I won't enjoy it as much without you to explain things to me,” protested Simon.

“I'll be there too, by your side. You will have no need to be afraid.”

“Well can we go up there right now?”

“You can only go up there when your number comes up,” was the artist's reply.

Simon was thrilled with the new insight he had gained and was eager to share it with others around him, but mostly they were indifferent.

Much later, when they were in yet another great hall, Simon stood in front of a very large painting of a very beautiful garden. In the distance, at the end of a long path, stood a figure with outstretched arms, looking very much like the artist.

As Simon stared into the painting he felt that the figure was beckoning him to step closer. Simon moved closer to the painting and the figure in the painting kept beckoning.

Simon moved closer and closer to the beckoning figure until the most amazing thing happened. The noise of the

crowd behind him began to diminish and he could hear the sound of gravel under his feet.

As Simon moved closer, the figure began to walk down the path towards him. The crowd noises were now very faint and in their place Simon could here birds singing and he could feel the warmth of the sun on his face.

The artist had moved down those converging painted lines that had somehow become a real gravel path. Simon reached out and touched the artist's outstretched hands.

“Welcome Simon!”

Meanwhile back in the crowded gallery the official guide was reading out some more numbers.

“There goes Simon,” said one of the group, and in the painting, at the end of the gravel path, there were now two figures engaged in deep conversation.

THE PETITION

In one corner of the beautiful gardens that surround Kingdom-Come Castle, a man was kneeling beside a flower bed, pulling weeds. The stillness was suddenly punctured by a series of impatient footsteps, striding up the path.

“I'm looking for a Mr Dunne – William B. Dunne. Where would I find him?”

“I don't know anybody of that name,” replied the gardener looking up from his work, “can I help you?”

“It's hardly likely. It's petitions, not petunias I've come about – this petition. I want to present it to the King and I was told to ask for Will B. Dunne of Kingdom-Come Castle. It's a nuisance that nobody here seems to have heard of him.

The gardener got to his feet and brushed the loose earth from his hands. “Perhaps you'd better let me see it ...”

The petitioner gave it to him and requested him to hold it by the edges so as not to make it grubby.

“Let's see what it says. ‘O your most majestic majesty, supreme ruler of this Kingdom, most wise and noble King ...’ Why did you begin like this?”

“You obviously don't know the first thing about petitions. Here, let me have it back and I'll try to find someone who can help.”

“Not until you tell me why you began like this. Was it out of a sense of your utter dependence on him?”

“Who me? Depend on the King? I should hope I can get by well enough on my own. No, you always start a petition this way, not that you'd know only being a gardener!”

“So, the reason for those words?” asked the gardener.

“Well if you want something, you have to grovel first, you know, put the King in a good mood by buttering him up. If ever you need to petition the King I could show you how to do it. So if you don't mind, could I have my petition back. I'm really in quite a hurry.”

“Wait a moment, I thought you'd come for a talk. I'd like to show you around. The red carnations have just come out and they really are beautiful.”

“I'm sorry to be rude but I really am a busy man.”

“Busy? Doing what?”

“You rustic fellows seem to have no idea how busy we men of the town can be. I'm afraid I've no time to waste gossiping about carnations. I've an important appointment at noon and I must present this document to the proper quarters before then.”

“But you've come to the right person, so why do you keep running off?”

“Well, why didn't you say that you were Bill Dunne, instead of wasting my time. And why is a court official like you doing dressed like that? It's not dignified.”

“No I'm not Mr Dunne and I find these clothes very comfortable for tending my flower beds. You see I am the King and these are my gardens.”

“Yes well, as I said Mr King, I haven't time to chat to you. As it's nearly noon you'd be so good as to take this to Mr Dunne. Here's sixpence for your trouble.”

“But I'd like to go over the document with you and discuss the details. Now this first one here. You've applied for a new post and you are asking me to influence those making the decision.”

“You don't seem to understand Mr King, how can I explain it? I want His Majesty to pull a few strings. If you'd only make sure he gets it.”

“And why do you exactly need this new job?”

“Oh, I don't actually *need* it. I've got a very important job already. But it's a more powerful job and ...”

“And I suppose it would make you even busier than you are already.”

“‘The devil makes mischief for idle hands to do’, as they say. I try to get the most out of life by packing as much as I can into it. In fact it's years since I last wasted time like this chatting to a perfect stranger. I don't know why I'm doing it.”

“Perhaps it might give your soul a chance to catch up with your body,” replied the Perfect Stranger. For it was in fact the King, the Lord God Himself. “And you say here that your aged mother is dying and you are praying for her recovery. A wonderful woman, your mother.”

“You know her?”

“Oh, yes, she comes here for a little time every day just to talk, or to sit and watch while I work.”

“But that's impossible. She's been confined to bed for months now. You must be thinking of someone else.”

“Her body is confined to bed, but not her mind and soul. Her spirit still comes by here each day. She waits patiently for the day when I free her from her worn-out body and bring her to live here permanently. Now to grant you your request would put off that day.”

“I seem to be wasting my time. You're knocking back my requests one by one, but by what authority I'd like to know? Well, what about the promise that whatever you ask for you shall receive?”

“My promise is that whatever you ask *in my name* shall be granted to you.”

“You mean that I should have addressed the letter to Mr Dunne?”

“Why, you still don't know I am. You have never taken time to get to know me. Prayer isn't a formal list of requests. It's the time I spend with my friends, here in this garden. My friends know me and they allow me to get to know them. If they have any problems or requests, they bring them here and together we work something out.”

“Goodness me, look at the time. I'll be late for my appointment. Well, it's been pleasant talking to you Mr King but you must excuse me now. I'll redraft the petition as you suggest. Good day now.”

As he hurried off, clutching his petition, a sudden breeze swept him off his feet and he fluttered up into the air. For he had become a paper cut-out man, as flimsy as the petition he was still holding as he wafted up above the trees. For years he had cut himself off from the reality of God until he himself was no longer real.

THE CREATION WINDOW

On the side of a hill, just below the village of Needhamlet stands an old stone church. People used to come from all parts of the country to see the northern window which depicted the six days of Creation. It was shaped like a large wheel with six spokes radiating from the centre. Each of the six sections depicted a day in the creation story.

It was a magnificent piece of art that any cathedral would have been proud to have. Yet it was set in the wall of a little village church that was otherwise no different to many others up and down the land. Many who came to see the Creation Window, as it was called, were deeply moved by it. It had a depth and a power which defied explanation.

On a certain wet Saturday afternoon, many years ago, a day that the people of Needhamlet will never forget, no sightseers came to the church. The sky was so dark that the lights were on in the church and the best view of the window would have been from outside. However the constant drizzle that oozed from the black clouds would have made this uncomfortable.

The only people in the church were a handful of the regular congregation. And being a Saturday afternoon it was not the regular service of worship. Nor was there a bridegroom standing at the altar nervously waiting for his bride. Yet the people were waiting for something and the organ had been playing monotonously for almost an hour.

“What time did he say he would be here?” asked one old lady.

“I'll read out the telegram again,” said a red-faced gentleman in the front row: “PLEASE HELP STOP SERVICE IN VILLAGE STOP MEET SATURDAY THREE PM AT PANES SIX DAIRY CLOSE FEED MY SHEEP”

“I can't get over the fact that *He* will be here. I mean imagine Jesus Christ coming to see us!”

“Oh it's not us He's coming to see, it's our window. The telegram's a bit garbled the way they usually are, but He mentions the window panes and the six days of creation – its says ‘six dairy’ but it obviously means ‘six days’. And He's seems to be particularly interested in the panel with the sheep.”

“What shall we say to Him when He comes?” asked the old lady.

“Nothing”, replied another man who appeared to be in charge, “we've got everything all prepared. As soon as he arrives we go straight into the service. Now remember, we start with hymn 369, “Jesus we look to thee ...”

“Trust that Mrs Payne to let us down with the solo. There's no sign of her.”

“I haven't seen her in the village for days. She's probably too ashamed to show her face since they was forced to sell up.”

“Yes, I suppose it's hard on her and her little girls,” said one old farmer, “but of course it serves old Payne right. To sow your seed when he did is only to ask for trouble. These town folk just don't understand the ways of the land. The sooner he gets back to the town the better, that's what I say.”

Still they waited. But Christ did not appear. After another half hour, a young man entered the back of the church and stood for a moment. The water collected about his feet. He walked forward a few steps and gazed up at the Creation Window.

“ ‘ere now, no sightseers now please. Can't you see there's a service in progress,” said one of the ushers. He moved over to the stranger as if to lead him out. But the young man stood firm.

“I asked for your help in serving the needs of the village and so I waited for you up at the Payne's house in Dairy Close where the need is greatest. Instead I find you huddled together down here as if you're hiding from something. When you didn't come I had to minister to the family myself. But they were a bit frightened of me at first and it would have been so much better if you had been there too. Didn't you know that Tom Payne has been away all week in the town looking for work and Mrs Payne has been quite ill, so ill that the children have eaten very little for days.”

“But *we* weren't to know,” said the old lady rather timidly, “nobody told us.”

“Love has a way of finding out,” Christ replied, for it was the Lord Himself standing there. “Inasmuch as you do not love your neighbour, you do not love me. Inasmuch as you do not *know* your neighbour you do not know me.”

As He said these words, the clouds must have parted for the sun came streaming through the Creation Window until all six panels were ablaze with light. The congregation looked up at it.

Once again Christ spoke.

“My Father loves the *whole* of His creation, not just the parts of it that lie inside sanctified walls. He created you to share in this love and to share this love with others, not just each other. But you have ignored this. You are so preoccupied with the symbols of God's love of His creation that you ignore the real thing and its needs. Henceforth this church will be open to the needs of the world outside it.”

As He said these words small pieces of coloured glass began dropping out of the window. The sound of breaking glass grew as more and more pieces poured out of the window onto the floor like a deafening waterfall. The congregation stood helplessly, watching this disaster, uncertain as to whether the whole church would collapse.

They watched the window until all that remained was the gaunt skeleton of lead strips. Through the

opening they could see the ugly backs of the row of houses on Dairy Close. One of them was the Payne's.

They looked back to where Christ had been standing, but saw only a patch of wet stone floor. The rain began to blow in through the empty window and they felt chilled. Their prized Creation Window was now just a litter of broken glass pieces on the floor of the sanctuary.

THE LITTLE BLACK ANGEL

Mick was the youngest angel ever to have applied for a job as guardian of a human soul. I don't know how old he was - in any case angel years are different to ours so it doesn't really matter. But he was at that awkward age when an angel's voice begins to break and so they wouldn't let him sing praises to God with the choir of angels. And his harp was broken. The strings had snapped one day when he was using them to fire little arrows at some of the other junior angels. Some of the elders got very cross with Mick for having ruined his harp but those who had heard him play said it was a mercy!

So little Mick was bored. If he couldn't praise God with his voice, which was something he really enjoyed, he wanted to go into the Guardians. I suppose you could say that this was the heavenly equivalent of the Boy Scouts. A Guardian is allocated a human soul and pledges to protect it. But unfortunately there were no spare human souls just at the moment. Also he was considered a little young. "Come back, Mick, when you're a little older," he was told.

He hated being called "Mick". He was named after the archangel Michael but because he was small for his

age everyone called him “Mick”. “Michael” is a strong, powerful name, but “Mick” sounded so small.

Why were there no souls for him to care for? Was it because his voice had broken? Or because his name was Mick? Or perhaps it was because he was black!

I expect you've never seen a black angel, even in a picture. You probably can't imagine how dazzling a little black angel can be. None of your dull coal-black. Mick was as shiny black as the sergeant's boots after he's spent two hours spitting and polishing. If you've ever been fortunate to see a gleaming brand new black Rolls Royce sparkling in the sun outside the showroom, you might have a little idea, just a little, of what he was like. So dazzling black that it hurt your eyes just to look at him.

Now you mustn't get the idea that being black he was one of the fallen angels. It's true that he'd fallen quite a number of times as he was learning to fly (he was one of the seraphim and it's hard to coordinate six wings all at once) but he loved God with all his pure heart, even as much as Gabriel himself.

One day he was soaring with a choir of angels high above the Australian outback. He wasn't singing, just

listening and twiddling his wings. He happened to notice far below on the hot and dusty plain a four wheel drive vehicle that had broken down. A man was peering under the bonnet while his little boy sat in the shade. After some time (you must remember that time goes quite differently in heaven so to Mick it was just the next moment) he saw the father wipe his brow and close the bonnet. He then went to his little boy, set him up with the water bottle and explained that he would have to go off to look for help. And he told the boy to stay with the car. Under no circumstances was he to wander away till help came.

As Mick watched, a day went by – though to him it only seemed like a second. The boy had started to become frightened being there all by himself and he walked away to look for his dad. As Mick watched the boy over the next few hours Mick saw that he was going in completely the wrong direction. When help came they'd never be able to find him.

Mick tugged at the wing of one of the bigger angels who was still singing and told him about the little boy's plight far below. The big angel whispered back, so as not to disturb the singing, “He's not my responsibility – I'm not his guardian angel. Look, when the singing's over we'll try to find which angel is responsible for him.

But don't worry! The boy will be O.K. in the meantime.”

Now Mick knew what the big angel had forgotten. The few minutes it would take for the praise to finish would be a few days down on earth. Mick knew he had to act quickly. He'd been taught in Angel School how to descend from heaven in glory though he'd never actually tried it before. But he did whatever was necessary and whoosh! The next thing he knew he was walking across the scrub, not far from the little boy.

“Be not afraid,” he called out. This was what he'd learned to say in Angel School. But just in case the boy didn't understand he added, “er – don't worry little fella, I won't hurt you”.

Mick knew that the boy would be terrified at the sight of a dazzling black angel with six shiny wings and eyes like glowing coals. Which is true, if that's what the little boy saw. But he didn't. You see, angels can also appear in human form and somehow he'd managed to appear in human form. What the little boy saw was a young aboriginal boy holding a boomerang. Far from being afraid the lost boy was relieved to see another human face - well he didn't know that Mick was really an angel, did he?

“Hi! I'm Tim. What's your name,” he asked Mick.

Now Mick didn't want to say “Mick” because it was such a little name, and he daren't say “Michael” in case the archangel was listening. So he said the first thing that came into his head. “They call me Mickaninni...but,” he added after a pause, “you can call me Mick.” So Mickaninni led Tim back towards the homestead. When they arrived a couple of hours later they saw the search party just starting to set out and of course they were amazed to see them both. What was particularly surprising was the fact that little Tim looked as fresh as if he'd been walking for only a couple of minutes whereas his father had taken three weary days to get there.

Well, with his job completed, Mickaninni found himself back with the heavenly host. The singing soon finished and the big angel leant over to him and said, “Right now, let's go and look for that little boy's guardian angel.”

“Oh, there's no need,” said Mick, “the boy's been found.”

“Oh good. Well there you are, I told you he'd be O.K.”

Now despite all he'd done Mick had only been gone for a few seconds and nobody had even noticed that he'd left. Or so he thought.

The very next day he was summoned into the presence of the Lord God Himself. The brightness was so intense that Mick had to shield his eyes by his own six wings.

“Be not afraid my young Mickaninni,” God said with pious mirth, “I see you've acquired the art of throwing the boomerang!”

“I-I-I'm sorry Sir for being absent from the praise service yesterday, but I couldn't let the little boy get lost.”

“My young seraph, don't you know that praise doesn't come from the lips. It comes from the heart. And when your heart prompts you to do my will, you praise me as much if you'd sung me a hundred psalms. In as much as you have done it to the least of my children you have done it unto me.”

Tim's guardian angel was “transferred to other duties” and Mickaninni, as he was always called after that, took over. And because Tim was a bit of a handful

(you see his mother had died the year before) and he was always getting into trouble, Mickaninni was given special dispensation to stay on the earth full time until Tim grew up.

And that's why, from that day, a little black boy was always seen in the vicinity of the homestead. Nobody knew where he'd come from or which tribe he belonged to. "Must be from the Gunji Gunji up there," said one of the aboriginal stockmen pointing vaguely north. And that's why, as Tim got older and went out riding on his own, he was often seen in the distance in the company of another rider.

The only thing left to tell in this story is the fact that at night when he thought nobody was around, Mickaninni would unfold his six wings and fly across the moon. You see it was important for him to keep in practice. Nobody did ever see him fly, that is, except for the stockman who caught sight of him late one night when he'd had a little too much to drink. And do you know, he hasn't touched a drop since!

AN ANGEL IN HADES

Michael wasn't the best behaved of angels. No way. I mean there was the time he tied the Angel Gabriel's wings behind his back and giggled as he watched him try to fly.

And it was really very naughty to have loosened the strings of Anthony's harp so that when he started playing to the glory of God there came out the most peculiar sounds. Anthony wasn't at all amused. God was but he tried not to show it.

No Michael was a bit of a devil, if you know what I mean. But good? Yes he was a good angel, as good at heart as any angel in heaven. He was a black angel, black not like coal, but shining black like highly polished ebony.

But Malchior. He really was bad. Although Michael liked him and would often play with him, even Michael had to agree that Malchior could be quite bad when he chose to be, which recently had become very often.

I won't tell you some of the dreadful things that he did. It might give you some bad dreams. It's enough to

tell you that his wickedness had come to the attention of God.

Well actually, God had known all along what he'd been up to. God is God after all, and He is all-knowing. But now the time had come for God to have to make a very hard decision. Malchior had to leave Heaven.

Now as it happened Malchior didn't seem to mind much being cast out of heaven.

“I was going to go soon, anyway”, he said, “Good riddance to all of you and to this place.”

Then he looked at God, pulled a face, and said, “And anyway, I could've made a much better God than you with one wing tied behind my back.”

Oh dear, that was one of the dreadful things that I wasn't going to tell you about. Too bad. You now have some idea of how wicked Malchior had become.

Everyone was upset. Not about him having to go - that was inevitable. It was the fact that he had become such a horrid angel that he was even glad to go.

Go where? Oh, yes I forgot to tell you. There really is only one place a fallen angel can go to, and that is, to the Other Place. Now you probably know it by another name that starts with "H" and rhymes with ... well I'm not going to use that name. In heaven they don't use bad language and so they just call it The Other Place or T.O.P. for short.

Now Michael and his young friend Cherry were especially upset because Malchior had been a good friend to them before he went bad. So upset were they in fact that when Michael suggested to Cherry that they go down to ... well, The Other Place to find Malchior she said, "sure, let's do it."

They planned to make him come back. If they could get Malchior to apologise and promise never, never to rebel again, they were sure God would take him back.

So as soon as they had an opportunity, Michael and Cherry slipped away without anyone knowing. Well of course God must have known, He's all knowing you see, but for some reason He didn't try to stop them.

I won't tell you the many adventures they had in finding The Other Place or we'll never get finished. But eventually they found themselves in ...

“Hello,” Michael called out to a dirty-looking boy sitting in the gutter. “Is this .. The Other Place?”

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else,” he called back rudely.

In fact he was so rude that Michael was sure that indeed he must have been in The Other Place. Though it wasn't quite what he expected. Like you and I, he had expected lots of fire and brimstone. This place wasn't like that at all. It was a cold and dreary city with rows and rows of identical, dark and narrow streets.

The houses were crowded together and most of the windows were boarded up - which didn't matter because there wasn't much to see. And although it was probably day, you couldn't be sure, the sky was so dark. There was a heavy pall of smoke blocking out the sun — that's if there was a sun.

The walls of the houses, the streets and even the faces of the inhabitants lounging about were covered in a dirty, greasy substance that seemed to be dripping out of the sky as you watched. A large rat scurried across the pavement and stared at them.

Nor were the inhabitants of this Other Place quite as he had expected. They didn't have bright red skins, and horns and pointed tails. In fact if you cleaned them up and gave them some wings they might have almost passed for angels. Except for their faces.

They didn't look sad – more like vacant. They gave the impression of not caring about anything. Some were motionless, leaning up against a lamppost or a wall. Others were equally motionless, sitting on a step, or in the gutter.

Those that were moving did so in a slow, repetitive way with absolutely no expressions on their faces. A group of children across the road were throwing a ball backwards and forwards with a total lack of energy and purpose. And the same two children caught the ball each time. The others made only a very half-hearted attempt to intercept it.

A procession of garbage trucks drove noisily down the street emptying the bins. And the funny thing was that even though each bin was emptied it seemed to be full again by the time the next truck came by a few seconds later.

And a little further up the street was a queue of people waiting for a bus. They looked as if they had always been waiting and as if they had no hope of it ever turning up.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.” It was the same sullen-faced boy who spoke, just as rudely as before.

“Come on,” said Michael to Cherry as he tugged her little wing, “we'd better move on.”

At that moment the rat, which had been staring at them, scurried off in fright.

They turned the corner and entered another street that looked exactly like the one they'd just left. In fact there was a group of children playing exactly the same game as those around the corner and there up the street was another group of people waiting for a bus that would probably never come, and the same looking garbage trucks were busy emptying the bins.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.”

Michael looked round and there was another black-faced boy rudely answering a question that Michael hadn't even asked, not in this street anyway.

This *was* a different street. It must have been because they'd turned the corner. Yet everything was exactly as it had been in that other street. The only difference in fact was that instead of a big black rat staring at him, there was a large black cat. Its eyes showed that it was frightened and although it stood still its muscles were tense, and it was ready to run.

“Come on,” said Michael to Cherry as he tugged her little wing, “we'd better move on.” The black cat ran off in fright as they walked towards the corner.

Turning the corner they now found themselves in yet another street. It was lined with narrow houses with grimy walls and boarded-up windows. And like the two previous streets there were people sitting or standing, not doing anything in particular. And there was a bus queue and the garbage trucks just like before. There were some children playing ball. It was absolutely identical to the other two streets. Only the dog was different. Where there had been a big black cat in the last street there now was a small black dog, just as frightened as the cat had been.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.”

“Come on”, said Michael as he tugged Cherry's little wing, “we'd better move on.”

And the dog ran off in fright as they did.

Now when they had turned the next corner into yet another dreary street, just like the others Cherry turned to Michael and said, “Why do you keep saying ‘come on, we'd better move on’ in exactly the same way all the time? It frightens me.”

You know how sometimes your mind wanders and you do some stupid little thing over and over, like drumming your fingers on the table until something happens to wake you up out of it. Well that's exactly what happened to Michael.

It was like waking from a dream. For a moment all he could remember was turning out of one dirty street into another for a whole eternity. But then, slowly, as in a mist, he remembered where he'd come from and why he had come but it was still as if he was under a spell. If he didn't break out of it in the next few seconds he felt

he would spend the rest of eternity acting out those same silly actions and saying “come on” with the same dull voice..

“Course not stupid. The Other Place ...”

But Michael didn't wait to be insulted yet again by yet another rude and grubby urchin. He ran towards the children, caught their ball and threw it right back to the boy who'd just thrown it.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Everything started going backwards. It was just as if a film in a projector had been run in reverse.

The children continued playing as before but they now ran backwards. The garbage trucks backed down the street one after the other emptying the rubbish back into the bins.

Michael stood there blinking. And as he stood a big black dog stared at him nervously. It wasn't the same dog as before – a different breed – much bigger.

And then, before the dog had a chance to move, Michael dived on top of him and pinned him down. “Quick Cherry help me.” Cherry was puzzled.

Everything that was happening here seemed so strange. She wanted to go home. But she wouldn't be able to find her way back without Michael and he'd started to go all strange as well.

"Why are you trying to catch that stray dog in this awful place?" she asked him.

"Don't just stand there, help me. It's Malchior!"

Now the dog, whether his name was Malchior or not, didn't want to go anywhere.

"You see", everything in this place just goes round in circles..."

"Course not stupid. The Other Place ..."

"See what I mean? Now what's been the only difference between all these streets?"

Cherry thought hard as best she could while trying to help drag the unwilling dog.

"Well in the first street there was this rat, and ... yes, in the next street there was that frightened cat, and then a dog..."

“Exactly,” said Michael, “everything that comes to this place eventually becomes a part of the circle and it goes round and round and round and round ...”

“Mick,” she yelled.

Michael snapped out of it. You have to be very careful in this place not to be caught up in incessant repetition.

“The fact that this rat/cat/dog kept changing meant that it hadn't been here very long. I knew then it had to be Malchior.”

“And he was so frightened. The cat, or dog, or Malchior if it really is him.”

“That was the other thing. Nobody else in this place shows any emotion. But the animals were scared. So whatever power is in this place hadn't got to him yet.”

By this time they had managed to drag the dog back to the previous street.

“Look,” said Cherry, “he's the other dog now.”

Being smaller, this dog was much easier to manage. They got him around the corner, being careful not to get run down by the reversing garbage trucks. Around the next corner they found themselves clutching a cat. Though it was smaller than either of the dogs it was much harder to handle. If you've ever tried to carry a cat when it knows it's going to be given a bath, you'll know what I mean.

But being scratched by a struggling cat is nothing to being bitten by a large rat. That's what happened when they got back to the first street.

Now how they got that rat back to Heaven is also another story. Needless to say, somewhere on the way the rat became Malchior. But was he grateful for being rescued? Not a bit of it. He didn't want to go back.

I won't tell you all the horrid names he called them, otherwise you mightn't be able to sleep at night. But they still struggled to bring him back.

Then as they got closer to the Pearly Gates he struggled less and less. And at last he said, "why are you going out of your way to save me. Haven't I caused enough trouble?"

Now you remember that saucepan that you burnt the porridge in that day, where the food burnt and stuck so hard to the bottom that nothing, but nothing could remove it? You know, that saucepan that Dad said should be thrown out because nothing can ever get it clean again and which Mum soaked for days and Dad said what's the use because the burnt is still stuck as hard as ever to the bottom and he'll buy her a new one anyway?

You remember, that saucepan which after a week of soaking, the black started to soften and Mum scraped hard and eventually got it clean again and Dad said it was hardly worth all that trouble but Mum said it was?

Ah so you do remember. Well that saucepan was like Malchior. As a result of being soaked by the love of his two friends, the dirt on his soul started to soften and eventually with a lot of hard work it came off. Like the saucepan he didn't have to be thrown out after all.

As they reached the gates of heaven there was a huge crowd of angels, except with angels you always call them a 'host'.

They were cheering and waving to welcome their return. And God was standing there in the middle, waving as strongly as the rest.

Later, when God spoke to Michael and Cherry he said, “I knew that Malchior's only hope was to have to leave Heaven and be brought back by you and little Miss Bim but I didn't have the right to ask you to go because it was such a risky business. After all you might have so easily got stuck in that Other Place for all of eternity.”

“It was a risk worth taking,” said Michael smiling at Malchior.

THE RUBBISH FOLK

In the world of fairytales there are many strange kingdoms. I'd like to tell you about one of the strangest of them all, the kingdom of Rubbland.

Now what I'm about to tell you is the gospel truth. You see, I lived in Rubbland many years ago and I saw these things with my own eyes.

Like all kingdoms, Rubbland had a king and he was called King Rubb. Now whether he was called King Rubb because he was the king of Rubbland or whether Rubbland was called Rubbland after King Rubb, nobody ever told me. But what is certain is that those who lived in the kingdom were called the Rubbish Folk.

Oh no, not me, no. I wasn't one of them myself. Sometimes I think I might like to have been a folk of some sort but, you see, I'm a bird.

I hope you won't hold that against me. I'm not a liar bird, you know. I'm not making this up. I know what I saw and I tell you it's the gospel truth.

Now the strange thing about this Land of Rubb was that it was completely free of bacteria. Yes, bacteria -

you know, those tiny creatures that are so small you can't see them.

But just because you can't see them that doesn't mean that they aren't there. Oh I can see you don't believe me because I'm only a bird but I swear to you that what I'm saying is really the gospel truth.

Well, as I said, just because you can't see them doesn't mean that they're not there. You can't see the wind but if you're flying into it you know it's real.

But in Rubbland it was different. You couldn't see the bacteria because they weren't any.

Now that meant that food never went off. You could keep milk for years and it'd never go sour. Bread never went mouldy. But it had its down side. You see, having no bacteria meant that they could never enjoy yoghurt. Personally I don't know what people see in the stuff - never touch it myself - but some people like it. In Rubbland it doesn't exist.

I don't know whether you know this but you can't have yoghurt without bacteria. Oh, I can see you don't believe me but I swear it really is true.

The worst thing about not having any bacteria though, was that you could never get rid of your household rubbish. In your land here you just put the kitchen scraps into the garbage and the rubbish gets carted off to the tip and is buried underground. Then the bacteria get to work and decompose the waste into good healthy compost. All of this works with the help of those wonderful little creatures you call bacteria.

But in Rubbland, with no bacteria, they can't do this. If the kitchen scraps were buried they'd just stay there forever. And being environmentally friendly people, the Rubbish folk had a law that no-one was allowed to throw away any rubbish. You had to carry it around with you all the time!

Well I'm glad to say that this law didn't apply to birds. We're very clean creatures and leave very few scraps but just suppose for a moment I let a grape stalk drop from my beak, well, who'd be there to catch me?

But for the Rubbish Folk it was a real burden carrying their accumulated rubbish with them everywhere you went.

The only place you were allowed to get rid of rubbish was inside the Mountain of Doom, an active volcano to the west of Rubbland.

In theory you could carry your rubbish there and throw it into the mouth of the volcano and the heat would be so intense that the rubbish would burn up completely as if it was in a giant incinerator.

But the trouble was that it was such a long way off that it would have taken years to get there, even if you didn't have a load of old rubbish to carry along with you.

And the problem was that it took so long to get there that you accumulated so much more rubbish as you went, and that slowed you down even more.

In fact, in the long history of Rubbland, though many tried, no one seems to have ever succeeded in getting there. Well, no-one except the king's son. But I'm coming to that. The further they went, the slower they became under increasing amounts of rubbish.

It wasn't that they died before they got there though. Oh no, they weren't allowed to. You see, in Rubbland it was against the law to die for any reason. If anyone died then someone else would have to take on the responsibility of their rubbish. In fact the dead body would just be extra rubbish for some poor soul to have to lug around.

So, as they say, Rubbish folk never die - they simply fade away - away towards the Mountain of Doom, getting slower and slower under the increasing weight of their own rubbish.

Flying high over the vast plains that surround the Mountain of Doom you could see a most amusing sight - vast mounds of rubbish, each moving imperceptibly, like so many messy glaciers, towards the volcano. And under each heap of trash was one of the Rubbish folk struggling with their burden.

I can see you don't believe what I'm saying but I assure you it's not one of those tall stories or whatever you people call them - no my story is as short as a sparrow's beak. Anyway, believe me or not I intend to continue.

Well, you see, the good King Rubb wasn't at all happy with this state of affairs. Of course he and his family weren't bothered by it themselves. You see, they were made of different stuff to the ordinary Rubbish citizens. Their food was the sunbeams and they drank the rainbows. There's no waste in that.

But King Rubb wasn't happy about the burden his people had to carry about. In fact he loved his people so

much that he sent his only son to live amongst them to see what could be done. I remember the king's son. I used to fly down to the palace gardens and he'd talk to me and I'd sing back to him.

Anyway for several years he taught the people how to cut down on their waste so they'd have less rubbish to carry around. I remember once he came across a young woman who seemed to have accumulated rather more rubbish than was proper for someone so young. She was surrounded by an angry crowd who were about to throw food scraps at her. But the king's son called out to them "let anyone who has no rubbish of his own throw the first scrap". When they heard that, the crowd melted away for they all carried burdens of rubbish on their own backs.

After some years the king told his son that the only way the problem could ever be solved was for he, the king's son to become the kingdom's garbage man. Yes, you heard me correctly - the king's son was to become a garbo.

Now that wasn't a very nice thing to ask a king's son to do, carrying other folk's rubbish on his back. But the king's son had broad shoulders and, he loved his father

so he said, "well, it's not my idea of a career but still let your will be done".

So he became the kingdom's garbage man. And even though his back was broad and strong he could scarcely move under all that weight.

Now you'd think everyone would be glad for him to take their rubbish off their backs, but do you know, most of the Rubbish folk wouldn't part with their rubbish. Not because it wasn't a fitting thing for a prince to collect garbage. Oh no! They thought that if he wanted to take it from them it must be valuable.

"Get away from me", they shrieked, "it's my rubbish. How dare you try to steal it from me." But those who accepted his offer danced for joy with the heavy burden having been taken from them.

And as the king's son struggled underneath an enormous pile of rubbish, towards the Mountain of Doom, many of the Rubbish folk called him names and some even spat at him.

"He calls himself the son of the king but look at him", they jeered, "why he's got more rubbish than any of us."

But the king's son just continued on towards the volcano. Slowly he hauled the mountain of rubbish up the side of the Mountain of Doom. It was night-time but the flames from the crater lit up the clouds.

Then, as he reached the edge of the crater, with his last bit of strength he managed to tip the rubbish over the side, into the red hot fiery core of the volcano. But then a terrible thing happened. Having no strength left to keep his balance, he toppled over, and followed the rubbish, down into the depths of the volcano.

Suddenly the sky became dark. The vast amounts of rubbish pouring down into the crater had completely blanketed the red hot flames.

I saw it all happen and I couldn't believe it could end like this. So I landed in a tree at the foot of the volcano and watched. For three days and three nights the volcano seemed dead, and there was no sign of the king's son.

But on the third day, as the sun's rays came up over the horizon, I did as I had done every few hours, I flew over the volcano and looked down into the crater. This

time, from one corner of the black depths I saw a faint glow.

Soon it grew brighter and brighter. Then I began to feel the heat so I had to circle higher. The light was whiter and purer than it had been before. It soon grew so bright I had to cover my eyes with my wings, which made flying very difficult I can tell you! I decided to look again, just for an instant and, I know you won't believe me, I saw the king's son rising up out of the brightness. At least he looked like I remembered him but his body shone.

He climbed out of the crater and started walking down the mountain-side. I flew up to him, overjoyed to see him and I was going to land on his head as I had done before many times in the palace gardens but he said, "do not touch me - I have not yet returned to my father."

So I flew beside him and sang, my heart was so full of joy. "Isn't it wonderful that it's all over", I chirped.

"Over?", he said, "So you think it's all over, my little one. It's many days since I was last in Rubbland. Don't you think that more rubbish will have accumulated while I've been away? I must go back for more."

I couldn't believe it! The king's son was going to start it all over again. He'd never finish his task. He would be struggling under the weight of rubbish that was not his own for all eternity. Oh how he must have loved his people.

I know that you can't believe it either. I'm only a bird and nobody ever believes a bird. But perhaps after hearing my story, perhaps deep down inside your heart there's a faint glow of belief.

But on the other hand you probably don't even believe that birds can talk!