

Luke 22:54-71; John 21:15-17

Aim of Lesson

To show how Peter failed his master and suffered remorse, and to demonstrate the understanding and love of Jesus in forgiving him.

Background study

Matthew 26:31-35; Mark 16:7; Luke 22:31-34; 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5; Hebrews 4:15-16.

Suggested outline of lesson

The scene for this lesson has already been set in the previous one. Jesus had been led away, and his disciples had fled in fear and confusion. Although Jesus had warned them that he was to suffer and die, they were unprepared for the cruel reality of his arrest. The forceful Peter wanted to be near his master and to know what was to become of him. Imagine his feelings as he followed at a distance, alone and apprehensive. He was anxious about his master, whom he loved, and afraid for his own safety.

Describe the scene in the courtyard of Caiaphas' house, and try to capture the atmosphere - the lateness of the hour, the intense darkness of the night, the bitter cold, the flickering yellow light from the guards' brazier, lamps and torches, and the speculation as to the outcome of the night's work, now that their mission had been accomplished. Peter, frightened by the situation into which his impetuosity and concern for Jesus had led him, hoped to remain an anonymous observer in the crowd. Convey the shock he must have felt at being recognized. As the light from the fire illuminated Peter's face, the maid uttered a loud accusation and pointed him out to her companions. Instinctively, Peter lied to protect himself. Children will all have experienced this natural defence mechanism. Perhaps Peter then moved away from the glare of the flames to become less conspicuous among the shadows. The second challenge was direct, and also directly denied. Again Peter moved away and the long night dragged on. Perhaps he grew impatient for news and began to ask questions. He spoke, of course, with a Galilean accent, which was very noticeable to the local Judaeans. His anger in response to the third accusation was symptomatic of a man desperate to cover up a lie. All his fear and anxiety about the future, his tiredness, discomfort and guilt, welled up inside him and culminated in a vehement outburst.

We are told that the cock crowed while Peter was still speaking, so that it was the strident crowing of the cock that silenced and mortified him. Ask the children to recall the significance of this sound and the prophetic words of Jesus (Matthew 26:34). At that moment, Peter caught sight of Jesus, either through an open door or because Jesus was being brought out. Stress the poignancy of the moment as the eyes of the two men met. Words were not needed to convey the sorrow of Jesus and the shame of Peter. Wretchedly Peter turned away, stumbled out of the courtyard away from the crowd, and gave way to despair.

Allow the children to talk about the feelings of Peter at this point, and his wretchedness at not having the opportunity to be reconciled with Jesus before he was put to death. Without developing the story of Jesus any further, point out that Peter was unable to talk alone with Jesus again and to tell him how sorry he was. How full of remorse he must have felt after Jesus had died, but it was too late for him to put matters right. Tell the children that it would be wrong to leave the story here because, in fact, Peter was to have the opportunity of talking to Jesus again, after Jesus had been raised from the dead. Immediately after the resurrection, the women who had visited the tomb conveyed a message from an angel, which specifically mentioned Peter, reassuring him that Jesus wanted to see him.

Remind the children that Jesus did appear on a number of occasions to a large number of people, and of the twelve it was Peter who saw him first. We are not told what passed between them at this first meeting, but a later conversation is recorded.

The details of the incident concerning the miraculous catch of fish are to be covered in a later lesson and need not be described here. The only thing that remains to be dealt with now is the exchange between Jesus and Peter. Do not attempt to expound the subtle play on words, but make the point that Jesus challenged him three times, so echoing the three challenges that led to his denial. On this occasion, Peter responded with fervent expressions of loyalty and devotion. The commission that Jesus gave him, to be a leader in the church, would have convinced Peter that he had been forgiven and that his master had confidence in his future strength. Tell the children that this confidence proved to be well-placed, for Peter never again let Jesus down, but went on to become a wise and powerful preacher who played a leading role in the early church. Show them that he wrote letters of advice and instruction to other Christians, which we are able to read today.

Relevance to the children's lives

Why did Peter feel ashamed? What had he done wrong? Did Jesus understand how he felt? Did Jesus forgive him? Have you ever felt that you have done something so bad that no one could forgive you? Do you know that, even if you felt like that, Jesus would know about it and would understand how unhappy you were feeling? All you would have to do would be to say you were sorry, and mean it, and you could be sure you would be forgiven.

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we thank you for the promise that if we are truly sorry when we do wrong you will forgive us. Amen.

Memory verse

'Jesus said to Peter: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren"' (Luke 22:32).