

Teach Peace Pack

Assembly: The angel of prisons



Aim: to learn about the life of prison reformer Elizabeth Fry and her determination to change something she believed was wrong.

Planning/Preparation: you may want to display an image of the £5 note.

1 Introduction: Prisons of the past

Ask the children: *what would it be like if your parents or carers broke the law and you were sent to prison with them?* Explain that this is what used to happen, and that there was a time in this country when if a mother was sent to prison for stealing bread, her children would have to go too. Prisons were dangerous, dirty places.

One of the reasons that prisons are not like this today is because of the work of a woman called Elizabeth Fry.

- Ask the children if anyone has ever heard of her, or seen her picture? [on current £5 notes]

2 Elizabeth Fry

Elizabeth Fry, who lived 1780–1845 in the reign of Queen Victoria, came to know a lot about prisons. This was not because she got into trouble, but because of her religious beliefs. Elizabeth's family were Quakers. Quakers believe that there is good (or something of God) in everybody and that each human being is precious and unique. This leads Quakers to value all people equally.

3 Quakers

Ask the children: *if Quakers believe there is good in everyone, why might they be interested in prisons, and how we choose to punish people?*

Ask the children to talk in pairs [Take feedback after a minute or two. Look for ideas about fairness; treating people with respect even if they have done something wrong; trying to help people 'turn their life around'].

Quakers believe that to build a more peaceful world, everyone needs to be treated fairly, and with love and kindness.

4 Learning about prison conditions

Elizabeth's family was quite rich, but she was brought up to believe it's important to help the poor. One day, a Quaker friend of Elizabeth's visited Newgate Prison. He saw prisoners sleeping on stone floors with no bed clothes, and babies crying from the cold. There were no doctors or nurses to help the sick. He went straight to tell Elizabeth what he'd seen. Elizabeth set to work collecting clothes for the women and babies and the next day set out for Newgate.

5 Visiting Newgate Prison

Newgate prison had one of the worst reputations as a dangerous and deadly place, and many of the women there had not even had a trial. The prison governor warned Elizabeth not to go inside. He said that the women were dangerous. Elizabeth was frightened but she went inside anyway. She was shocked by the filthy, dark and overcrowded cells. She dressed every baby in warm clothes and comforted every mother. The next day she brought more clothes and clean straw for the sick to lie on. This time Elizabeth prayed for the prisoners and was surprised by the effect – a solemn quiet spread throughout the prison. The women were moved by her message of love for them.

Elizabeth worked hard to raise money to open a school for the children in the prison, and some of the women did the teaching themselves.

6 Prison reform

After these visits to Newgate prison in London Elizabeth devoted her life to improving the conditions for women prisoners all over the country and even abroad. News of what Elizabeth had achieved encouraged other women to campaign for better conditions. The beating of women prisoners was abolished. The authorities began to look on prisoners as individuals, rather than as creatures to be locked away.

7 Transportation

Many women were transported to Australia for their crimes, though this could be for something as small as stealing fabric. Elizabeth made sure that every woman was given a bag of useful bits, including a Bible and a sewing kit and material, so that they could learn to read and gain skills to earn a living when they arrived in Australia.

- **Ask the children: why do you think Elizabeth thought this was so important?** [Otherwise they might have to commit more crimes in order to survive – she was trying to give the women the chance to ‘turn their lives around’].

8 Rajah Quilt

In 1841, the women on board the ship ‘Rajah’ made a quilt together. On arrival it was presented to the governor’s wife. Words sewn onto the quilt said that the women were very grateful for the kindness shown by the ladies in London, which they never forgot.

9 Conclusion

Elizabeth Fry became the most famous woman in England apart from Queen Victoria. Because she believed that something was wrong and was determined to do something about it, she changed people’s views on how to treat prisoners forever.

Follow up activities/resources:

- **Learn more** about Elizabeth Fry with Games, Fun Facts and videos on the BBC Schools page: <http://tinyurl.com/TPP-BBCFry>
- **Examine** whether Fry was one of history’s heroes? Consider the arguments for and against at: <http://tinyurl.com/TPP-HeroFry>
- Circle Time Discussion: **Elizabeth Fry is currently on our £5 notes.** Soon, new £5 notes are to be created. Explore with the children who they think should replace her and discuss the qualities that make a ‘Peace Hero’ – choose one for your own £5 note. This could be someone famous or from your class/school/family or local community.
- See **Peaceful Heroes** by Jonah Winter, 2013, and discover warriors who didn’t use weapons, including Martin Luther King Jr, Sojourner Truth and Gandhi.
- Look up more about the Rajah Quilt and its fascinating story at the website of the National Gallery of Australia: <http://nga.gov.au/rajahquilt>.