

17. Why would anyone choose to be poor?

INTRODUCTION

Ask children for their ideas about money and possessions: how important are they for a good life? Do they think anyone would choose to be poor, if they could be rich?

ACTIVITY

Show this short video advert for the National Lottery from 2013: www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/1214062/ or this one from 2022: www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5X38QA3rg

Ask children for their ideas about the National Lottery: players have to be 16 or over – why do they think this is?

Set up a 'continuum' across the room, with one end of the imaginary line standing for '100%' and the other for '0%'. Ask them to put themselves somewhere along the line according to their answer to such questions as:

- How happy would you be if your family won a lot of money?
- If your family won a lot of money how much of it do they think they would give to charities?
- How likely is it that, in the next six months there will be a big lottery winner who gives all their money away and becomes a wandering traveller in search of truth and happiness?

After each question, ask a few children to explain their position on the line and to change their position if they want to after hearing a range of views.

ACTIVITY

Read this short story about Brother Neville¹, a Franciscan friar:

Brother Neville was an impossibly thin man with a stubbly chin. He lived in a rat-infested house in Cable Street, East London. The house was inhabited by a small group of Christian 'brothers', or 'friars' as they are known. They were followers of St Francis, a monk who lived many hundreds of years ago. St Francis had been born into a wealthy family, but he chose a life of poverty.

In the 1950s and 60s the west end of Cable Street was a centre of violence and crime, including abuse of children. It was once

¹ Source: Kenneth Leech, 1986. Spirituality and Pastoral Care. London: Sheldon Press.

described as 'the filthiest, dirtiest, most repellently odoured street in Christendom.'

Brother Neville cared about all the people in Cable Street: runaway children, violent criminals, whoever. He listened to their problems. He helped them find their way. No-one really knows how many people Brother Neville saved from disaster.

Everyone there knew him as 'Father Neville', though many people who spoke little English could not spell his name. Letters arrived at the Franciscan house addressed to Father Nivel, Father Noble, Father Naval, Father Niggle, and even, 'Mister Fadernebble'. His faded brown robe seemed to blend in with the colours of Cable Street. He was a part of life there. Father Neville was also a shining example of Jesus' teaching to serve God by taking the side of the broken, the lost, the damaged, the poor and the sick.

Brother Neville didn't like to waste anything. He used to eat the crusts of burnt toast that others would throw away and wrote his sermons on the back of fruit pie packets. Brother Neville had a real joyfulness about him, yet he possessed nothing. Christians would say that he had the spirit of God inside him, working through him, making him a friend of the friendless and a helper of those who seemed beyond help. He sustained his mission through prayer; getting up early each morning to pray, and using prayer when people came to him with their difficulties.

Explain to children that Brother Neville chose to be poor. Do they think that someone who didn't believe in God would choose the life that Brother Neville lived? What reasons can they give for people being compassionate and showing concern for others, other than from religious conviction? Ask them to work in pairs to think up a good question for Brother Neville to answer were he alive today, e.g., about whether he was happy all the time, or whether he had any regrets. Encourage them to share their questions and suggest what Brother Neville might say in reply.

ACTIVITY

If time, play a scenario where a rich person is caught stealing something from someone in Cable Street. The victim takes the thief to Father Neville to ask for justice.

CONCLUSIONS

Ask the children if they can understand why someone might choose to be poor, bearing in mind the story of Brother Neville.