

Instant Story Session

Read this story, written in the form of a letter, aloud to your group on the evening you meet – or print off in advance and circulate among group members.

YOURS FAITHFULLY

Eva Bishop's letter to her vicar in response to his sermon on emotional maturity.

Dear Vicar,

I'm writing to thank you so much for this morning's service and in particular your sermon about emotional maturity. What a timely message, so true and useful for the church. (I didn't get much from the worship, mind you).

The things you said about emotional maturity really struck a chord with me.

It's all too easy to appear qualified as a fully-fledged, proper Christian while in reality remaining a spiritual infant. I only hope your words reached the right ears as, let's face it, there are many in our congregation who need to hear them desperately. I'm sure you know the particular individuals I'm referring to.

When you said the prayer at the end, I was praying it with all my strength for Connie McGuire (sitting next to me) who often seems frighteningly out of control of her emotions for someone in her – well, I'd guess late 40s – what would you say? Perhaps early 50s? (Either way, she's certainly at least ten years too old for that tattoo on her left ankle.) I have, in recent months, watched her crying again and again during times of worship, and she's always going up for prayer in floods of tears like a teenager, or worse. I worry about the message she sends out to others – she's clearly out of control.

And when you talked about how people in church need to think before speaking lest they cause some offence, my mind flew immediately to that chap who often wears his orange bobble hat during services. You know the one – Phil is



it? Or Dave? Phil or Dave, one of those names – Steve? Is it Steve? I've lost count of the number of times he has said offensive things to me – I think it's up to seven, now.

Once, I took a woman's cup away (I was on coffee duty again and I needed to wash up – this is another issue that you could do with addressing, actually, vicar: people will talk, on and on at the end of church. It makes it very difficult for those of us trying to leave the hall in a tidy state for the Brownies' Monday meeting. Perhaps we could have some sort of 'five minute conversation' limit imposed? Anything longer and they need to take it out into the car park. Better for everyone, especially anyone trapped with Phyllis Duggan.) Anyway, this woman had left it too late to drink up, so I took the church's cup from out of her hand in order to go and wash it up. I had quite a job to pull our cup from her grasp, so I said, 'It's drink up or wash up time! Rules is rules,' I said! Well, they are, aren't they?

Well! He – Phil, Dave or Steve or whoever he is, you know who I mean, don't you, orange bobble hat person – he grabbed the cup from me and gave it back to the woman, I think she was a visitor for a baptism or something, and he said 'I don't think so, Eva!' Those were his actual words! Just like that!

I have no idea what happened to that woman's cup in the end – I only hope Phil, Dave or Steve – or is it Chris? – Anyway, I just hope he took responsibility for his actions and washed it up himself. Somehow, I doubt it.

We can only hope God changes his heart and his outlook, and that in the meantime God might protect those of us whom he offends so freely.

And then there's Tony and Marissa with the new baby. I know it's their first but, really, talk about a pair of drama queens! I mean, millions of people have babies every day - what's the big deal?!

I for one didn't know where to look last week when Marissa started breastfeeding right there in the church! Right in front of all of us! Breastfeeding! With men and children in the same room!

Imagine if the second coming had happened on Sunday and she'd been caught out in that position! Or if we'd had a fire alarm! Or the BBC had turned up to film an impromptu episode of Songs of Praise! It doesn't bear thinking about.



And what damage is she doing to young impressionable minds? (Or old ones, for that matter?) What's wrong with a bottle, I want to know? I was bottle fed. Everyone was bottle fed when I was a baby, I'm certain of it.

I saw that sticker up by the doors saying we are a 'breastfeeding friendly church,' and of course I realise that God designed this mode of feeding for those emergency situations when there's no bottle to hand, but it's entirely possible to be friendly to people whilst putting them in a room with a door that we can close.

The simple fact is, it's very difficult to sing, pray, read or listen to the sermon when there is an appendage exposed. I didn't know where to look during 'When I Survey.'

And the fuss her husband makes of the baby! Honestly, it's just a baby! Put it down, let it cry – we all have to accept sooner or later that no one's going to give us attention just because we're awake! The earlier in life that lesson's learnt, the better, I believe.

Your words were like arrows shooting straight to the pair of them. I only hope they looked up from the baby long enough to hear what you said.

And what about our newest newly-weds? I slipped into the back row of their wedding just a month ago. All that money spent on the reception – I heard all about it – and what did I see in the church car park, just one day after they returned from their honeymoon? There were the supposed lovebirds having a right old humdinger in that rusty Honda Civic of hers! Who knows how long they'll last? It's hardly a good start, is it? I mean, Christian marriage is there to be a reflection of the glory of God: I'd hardly call a row in a Honda Civic a joyous echo of our Creator's splendour, would you?

The problem with married people is it all comes too easy for them. They want to try being single for forty seven years, then they wouldn't be so despising of their good fortune. They take it for granted, forgetting how lonely everyone else is.

Before I sign off, I wanted to explain my recent absence, and quash any rumours you may have heard regarding it. I know how quickly gossip and wrong assumptions fly around this church. 'One should never assume,' my mother used to say, and how right she was! A certain somebody – I won't name them, but you do know them (they've got red hair) - asked me if I might be



depressed last week (and they drive a Volvo) when I bumped into them in Sainsbury's, and if that might be why I hadn't been at church for a while. (They've got a Labrador).

I'd like to set the record straight on this one: there's absolutely totally and utterly nothing wrong with me! I was just not at my best, that's all, and I always feel it's better not to come to church when one's not feeling at one's best, because nobody needs to be dragged down by another's whinging and whining - it's not helpful to the church. This is why you haven't seen me - I've been waiting until I am better again, so that I may cheerfully encourage those around me. Just the sort of spiritual maturity you're looking for, am I right?

I must draw to a close. I've got my neighbour coming in. She's had a terrible time of it, poor woman, lost her husband six months ago. She's entirely unable to cope, so I'm doing my bit. Mind you, she's not an easy woman, it's no wonder people steer clear of her. I couldn't get anyone else from the street to join us for coffee. Still, thank goodness I'm here, at least there's some Christian witness going on in my neighbourhood. I shall raise her spirits, if only for a little while. If nothing else, I shall thank God for the reminder that there's always someone worse off than yourself. My mother used to say that, too – how right she was!

Yours faithfully,

Eva Bishop



LET'S TALK

1. What are Eva's complaints? List them out. What does each one tell us about what's really going on in Eva's life?
2. 'It's all too easy to appear qualified as a fully-fledged, proper Christian while remaining a spiritual infant...' What do you think about this assertion of Eva's at the beginning of her letter?
3. Compose a letter from the vicar in response to Eva's letter. What will you say to her?
4. How do you deal with the temptation to apply God's word to others and not to yourself?
5. Do you feel you know those you share church life with beyond a Sunday service? How does / can your church deepen understanding, empathy, love and support between members?



LET'S LISTEN

'Our Father is kind; you be kind.

'Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticise their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier...

Luke 6:36-37

'Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behaviour. Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them...'

Matthew 7:12

'Let me tell you something: Every one of these careless words is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation.'

Matthew 12:36-37

'So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly – or worse. Eventually we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit...'

Romans 14:11



LET'S PRAY

Pray together in response to any issues raised by this evening's discussion.

You might like to take your letter writing further, and write your prayers as letters to God this evening, to be shared or not as is considered appropriate.

PRAYER JOURNAL SPACE

REFLECTIONS, LEARNING POINTS AND IDEAS FROM THIS SESSION...



Author's notes on the story YOURS FAITHFULLY

Themes covered by this story:

Prejudice; loneliness; sadness; emotional intelligence; spiritual maturity; feeling on the fringes of church; complaining; self-awareness.

I've mentioned before that I grew up in a vicarage, and my experience is that there are plenty of Eva Bishops out there! My dear Dad really had the patience of a saint with everyone, and gave his love indiscriminately – occasionally to my utter shock as a child – How could Dad give so much time to that nasty old whatsit...?!

I think he must have done it because he discerned the subtext of people's lives, the real issues going on between the lines. There's always a reason behind a person's behaviour, the outer expression merely pointing to the inner emotion or motivation. In screenwriting, the saying goes 'action is character' – that is, you show who a person is by what they do. It's true in all of life.

Easy as it is to condemn Eva Bishop as a judgemental busybody, if we're really, painfully, embarrassingly honest, we can all tend to think the exact same way she does.

We all have a little inner Eva Bishop, whispering critical phrases and cutting us off from those around us. This is the heart of what I hope to get to with this story. If we condemn Eva outright, we do just as she does.

Short Christians contains twelve stories, following a moment in the lives of twelve characters within a church family. Each story comes with the questions, bible verses and prayer pointers as presented here. At the end of the book, an Author's Notes section gives the inside story on each story, revealing my thought processes and intentions behind each piece.

It began life as a resource for my own small group. It worked beautifully for us, and I hope it might bless yours. Best of all, there's no planning required – a whole term of lively, engaging conversations, thought and prayer without a moment's preparation. So, you get to enjoy small group as much as everyone else does! To order your own copy, visit Amazon.

