Dennis Richards selects books that could help when planning school assemblies

The long-running debate over collective worship has been in the news again this summer. Elsewhere in this supplement there are significant contributions to the discussion. Since nothing is likely to change any time soon, however, in schools all over the country thoughts are turning to assembly themes for the year. Assembly leaders are desperate for any kind of material that will captivate an audience — even in the most apathetic environments.

Malcolm Muggeridge once said that there were only five basic jokes. You’ve Been Framed as the banana-joke is one; and Captain Mainwaring in Dad’s Army as the banana-apathetic environments.

In the same way, perhaps, there are only five assemblies and five themes that are at the heart of what we should be able to achieve. There is a common vehicle — which is, of course, a story. Since Jesus himself was a master storyteller, that is no surprise. Here is a selection of the best to inspire us all to face a new academic year.

**The Selfish Crocodile**, by Faustin Charles and Michael Terry (Bloomsbury Books, £6.99 (£6.30)), features a loud and vexatious crocodile yelling to all and sundry “Stay away, from my river! It’s my river! If you come in my river, I’ll eat you all.”

At some stage during the assembly cycle, we would expect schools to consider the global dimension and the interdependence of nations in the modern world. This rich theme is beautifully presented in this classic story, when an insignificant little mouse comes to the aid of a unfortunate reptile. It is a small world, now, and it will not always be those who shout loudest who come out on top. In God’s world, the first will not always be first. Try the Rich Fool from Luke 12 as a back-up — although, it has to be said, he did not have the chance to learn from his mistakes. We have.

A Squash and a Squeeze, by Julia Donaldson (Macmillan, £6.99 (£6.30)), is not perhaps the most obvious Donaldson choice. The diverse collection of storybooks is perhaps best known for The Gruffalo, but this story develops from an elderly lady’s complaint that “There’s not enough room in my house”, and has everything to say about perception. The teacher cannot not to covet our neighbour’s house, or garden. How things are will often depend on the way we perceive them. The world is a wonderful place as it is. On one occasion, Jesus touched a blind man’s eyes, and asked him what he could see. “I see trees, but they look like trees walking about,” was his initial response, before Jesus touched his eyes a second time, and healed him.

If you need another delightful story which says much the same thing, go for the “smelly blanket” in Kipper, by Mick Inkpen (Hodder, £5.99 (£5.40)). Another proven winner.

We could develop our third theme through Marvin Wanted More, by Joseph Theobald (Bloomsbury, £6.99 (£6.30)). This story of a sheep who is so unhappy with his body shape that he decides to take desperate measures, is perhaps the most important message of all for the 2014 generation.

The moment where Marvin explores, and is violently sick, never fails to amuse children of all ages. But the message is deadly serious. Marvin’s friends look on helplessly as he almost destroys himself. Self-harm, eating disorders, and low self-esteem hover unstated in the background as this assembly is delivered. Marvin has to learn to like himself and appreciate his unique place in the world.

The church school can add the rationale that God loves us as we are: “As it is, blessing is being rich, and even being slim are not the Christian virtues to be the goal of success.” In Ambrose Goes for Gold, by Tor Freeman (Macmillan, £5.99 (£5.40)), our hero is confident that he can do pretty much anything in the Great Insect Games. But he can’t; it is not until he accepts his limitations as a termite that he wins the twig-eating competition. He concludes triumphantly: “Everybody really is good at something!”

And it is to that end that teachers devote energy and effort in the search to find out what it is, for every child. Gerald, the hero in Giraffes Can’t Dance, by Giles Andreae (Orchard Books, £6.99 (£5.40)), is another character who has been coached to accept his limitations.

In the same way, perhaps the most important theme of all is that children have a right to be unique, that they should not be reduced to types. But the message is deadly serious. Marvin’s friends look on helplessly as he almost destroys himself. Self-harm, eating disorders, and low self-esteem hover unstated in the background as this assembly is delivered. Marvin has to learn to like himself and appreciate his unique place in the world.

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**8 Bible-themed Journey Days for Primary Schools**

The above books have no direct biblical content, but the recently published 8 Bible-themed Journey Days for Primary Schools, by Max Velthuijs (Andersen, £6.99 (£6.30)), is part of a much-loved series. Much loved, perhaps, because Frog is unquestionably cute — I am told that children love his shorts. Fear of the dark, fear of death, fear of loss, fear of failure; at the heart of this lovely story is the support we can get from friends at such times. Church schools will wish to add the God dimension to times such as these.

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