

Albrecht Dürer lived in Nuremberg around 500 years ago. He was the eldest of 18 children and his father was a goldsmith who had to work hard to keep food on the table. From a young age, it was clear that Albrecht had a talent for drawing. He often helped in his father's shop, working to produce fine metal brooches and decorative ornaments. This work needed great care and attention to detail, and Albrecht enjoyed putting the same detail into his drawings.

As he got older, Albrecht knew that he wanted to become an artist. He also knew that, to do this, he would need to learn from some of the great artists of the day. This would be expensive and he knew that his father would find it difficult to afford the years of training that were required. There was another problem, too: his brother, Albert, also wanted to become an artist, and there was no way that their father could afford for both boys to train.

The two boys discussed their hopes and plans endlessly, but could see no way that would enable them both to get what they wanted. Eventually, they made a pact and agreed that one brother would have to work in the local mine in order to support the other during his training. Then, once the training was finished, this brother would sell his paintings to support the other brother with training. It was settled with the toss of a coin and Albrecht won – he would be first to learn from the masters.

Albrecht spent time with artists in Germany and Italy. He became especially skilled at producing pictures cut into wood blocks that could make prints, some of which are still being used 500 years later! While Albrecht mixed with artists, his brother, Albert, worked in the mines. It was hard and dangerous work, but Albert persevered in the hope that soon he would have the opportunity that his brother was having. As they had agreed, Albert regularly sent money to support Albrecht.

In time, Albrecht's training was completed and he returned to his home town. He had become a well-known artist and he was able to earn considerable sums of money from work that was commissioned by wealthy aristocrats. Albrecht was now prepared to keep his end of the bargain and, at the family party that was thrown on his return, he renewed the promise that he had made to his brother. 'Now, dear Albert, you can leave the mine and learn from the masters as I have. You have supported me and now I will support you. You will lack nothing, for my earnings will pay for the best teaching anyone could wish for, from the best artists in the world.'

Albrecht looked with dismay at his brother, who stood with tears running down his face. Albert stretched out his hands and spoke quietly. 'Not so, dear brother. I am proud that you have become an artist and I am glad that I was able to help you, but look at my hands. Work in the mines is hard and I have had every finger smashed at least once, the joints are swollen and I have developed arthritis. I find it hard to hold a glass in my hand, let alone a paintbrush, so I can never become the artist I wanted to be.'

Albrecht embraced his brother: he realised the sacrifice that Albert had made, and marvelled that his brother was not resentful and bitter about what had happened. Would he, he wondered, be so generous if it were the other way round?

'Well, then,' said Albrecht. 'You may not become a famous artist, but those hands that demonstrate the sacrifice you made for me will be famous, for I will use the skills that I have learnt to make them so.' And that is just what happened. Albrecht drew the hands of his brother, and this drawing became very famous.

Time for reflection

Suggest, or ask the children to suggest, expressions that relate to hands and explain their meaning. For example, lending or giving a hand; having a handout; he's a handful; to be shorthanded; many hands make light work; and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Discuss how hands can convey meaning without words, for example: begging; stop; come here; over there; that way; aggression; and looking up or down.

Point out that the prime motivation for sacrifice is love. Help the children to think about the sacrifices that are made because of great love. For example; the father who will dive into a raging sea to rescue his child; the sacrifice of servicemen and women who die for love of their country (NHS staff right now) and the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, who Christians believe gave himself for the love of the world.

Ask the following questions, pausing for a moment after each to give time for thought.

- Do we always use our hands for 'good' things? Can you think of some of each (good/bad)?
- How will you use your hands today?

Activity

Make a list of as many things that you do with your hands today. Then, act out doing the thing you did and see if your Mum/Dad or sibling can work out what you're doing. Tick them off if they do.

REMEMBER - Our hands, like our words, can hurt or help. Make sure you try to use them well.