Stories for Thinking #4 - 'William Tell'

(Legendary Swiss Folktale, 1307 CE)

The people of Switzerland were not always free. Once they were ruled by a nearby country called Austria.

One day a man named Gessler was made governor of their country. Gessler was a cruel man who made many harsh laws which the Swiss were forced to obey. The Swiss longed to be free, and one of them was brave enough to stand up to Gessler - and his name was William Tell.

Gessler knew the Swiss hated him, so he thought of a plan to show them he was master. 'Bring me the longest pole that you can find,' he ordered his servant, 'then fetch one of my hats. Not the best I keep for Sunday, but one of my old ones.' He ordered that the hat be placed on top of the pole. 'Now,' said Gessler, 'tell all the people that whoever passes this hat must bow down to it!"

The long pole was planted in the market square and all who passed would bow down to Gessler's hat.

One day a hunter named William Tell went to town with his son. When they reached the market-place a guard shouted, 'Halt! You must bow to the hat of your master!'

'Why should I bow to a hat?' asked Tell.

'It's the law. That is the governor's hat, and all must bow before it.'

'I am a free man,' said Tell. 'I will never bow to a hat.'

When Gessler heard of this he was angry, and made up his mind to punish Tell. He knew Tell was a skilled hunter, and no-one could shoot with a crossbow as well as he. So he thought of a cruel plan to punish Tell.

Gessler ordered his soldiers to bring Tell and his son before him. 'They say you are the finest shot with a crossbow in the land,' he growled. 'I have a test for you. This apple can be your target. You have broken the law Tell, but if you can hit the target you shall go free. We will place the apple against that tree - on your son's head!'

'Punish me,' said William Tell, 'but spare my son. He has done you no harm.'

'Speak no more,' said Gessler. 'You must hit the apple with *one* arrow. If you miss, my soldiers will slay the boy here in front of you."

'...I am not afraid, father,' said the boy. 'I will stand quite still. I know you can hit the apple.'

The boy then walked over to the tree and carefully placed the apple on his head. William Tell took two arrows from his quiver. He put one in his belt, and the other on his crossbow. With a steady hand he drew the crossbow back, 'CLACK', and took aim. 'T-w-a-n-g!' The arrow whistled through the air. The crowd gasped, then gave a great cheer. The arrow split the apple in two!

Gessler turned angrily to Tell. 'All right Tell,' he said 'you can go. But first tell me why you put the other arrow in your belt.'

'If the first arrow had harmed my boy, the second would have pierced your heart.'

'I knew it, traitor!' shouted Gessler. 'Seize him, men! Chain him and take him to the dungeon!"

On his way to prison Tell managed to escape by leaping from the boat and swimming to the lakeshore. His story was a signal for the people to rise up against their common enemy. After a great struggle across the land Gessler was killed, some say shot by William Tell himself. And in the end Switzerland became what it is today, a free country.