

Baukis and Philemon

Duration: 9 min 17 sec.

Summary

Zeus and Hermes hear of a valley in Phrygia where the sacred laws of hospitality are no longer observed. In disguise, they visit the valley in a terrible storm and are turned away from a hundred homes. The only people to invite them in and offer them food are an elderly couple, Baukis and Philemon. When their wine jug keeps replenishing itself, they realise their guests are in fact gods. Ashamed by the meagre fare they have provided they decide to kill their prized possession, a goose, but before can do so the gods reveal who they are.

After taking the old couple outside to show the flood they have brought to punish their fellow citizens, the gods give them two wishes. Their requests are simple: first, that their home be turned into a temple where they can worship the gods; second, that they may die at one and the same moment. Their wishes are granted and at the moment of death they are transformed into trees, an oak and a linden, with their branches entwined in an eternal embrace.

Starting points

- Try asking the children to imagine that they are in an isolated farmhouse on a very wet and windy night, when two strange men coming knocking on their door asking for food and shelter. What would they do?
- You could review with the children what they have learnt about Zeus in the stories so far. Tell them that in this story we find that, in addition to being god of the heavens, he is also the god of hospitality responsible for the protection of travellers and strangers. What would it have been like to travel in ancient Greece, when you could only travel overland on foot or horseback, when the roads were nothing more than rough tracks, there were no hotels, and no police or hospitals to help you?

Pause points

1 min 25 sec: *Every request was greeted with kicks and curses and insults. A hundred homes they visited.*

- Which gods have come down from Mount Olympos? (*Zeus and Hermes.*)
- Why have they come down? (*To find out if the rumour is true that the townsfolk are ignoring the laws of hospitality.*)
- Why have they come in disguise? (*To see how the townsfolk treat apparently ordinary travellers – they would have acted very differently if two gods had knocked at their doors.*)
- What sort of reception do they receive?
- How do you think the gods will react to this treatment?

4 min 33 sec: *Then came the stew and, after the stew, they had nuts and grapes and figs and a slice of sweet honeycomb.*

- On the basis of what we have heard so far, what adjectives might we use to describe Baukis and Philemon? (*Old, poor, uncomplaining, childless, devoted, welcoming, generous, good-natured, attentive.*)
- What sort of meal do they give the travellers? Do you think the travellers will have enjoyed it?

6 min 59 sec: *'Speak now! Anything will be granted you. Speak now!'*

- Drawing on what we know of Baukis and Philemon, do you think that they will wish for the same sort of wishes that King Midas did? What about them who suggest that they will not ask for wealth? What might they wish for instead?

Questions for discussion

- Is it still important today to be hospitable to strangers? If so, why are children told, 'never speak to strangers!' Should our behaviour be governed by circumstances? Should our behaviour be governed by the way people look or their social status?
- Why do the gods appreciate so much the hospitality shown by Baukis and Philemon?
- Do the townsfolk deserve their punishment?
- What does this story have in common with the story of Orpheus and Eurydike? (*Both involve a loving couple and both couples are united in death, but in the case of Baukis and Philemon they enjoy a long and happy life together too.*)
- What transformations take place in this story? (*Gods become ordinary travellers and change back again; the valley is turned into a lake; Baukis and Philemon's hut becomes a temple; Baukis and Philemon are transformed into trees.*)
- Find examples of humour in the story. (*Baukis and Philemon keeping the conversation going to distract their guests' attention from the delay in the meal being served; the wobbly table; the failed attempt to kill the goose.*) Does the humour detract from or add to the story?
- What lessons should we learn from this story?
- Why do you think that the storyteller begins and ends the story with almost the same description?

Suggested activities

- Try creating speech or thought bubbles for Baukis and Philemon and the two gods in the painting (<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/jupiter-and-mercury-in-the-house-of-philemon-and-baucis/8AG2eapZA6QPZA>) by Jacob Jordaens, 17th century Dutch painter. Before starting the activity, you could ask the children to compare the scene in the painting with the storyteller's description of the meal:
 - What elements do they have in common? (*The goose, the wine, the bowl of fruit.*)
 - What is different? (*The painter has made no attempt to make the gods look like ordinary travellers; Baukis and Philemon's house is more substantial than one might expect of poor peasants; there is a malevolent cat in the bottom right of the picture!*)
- Using as a stimulus Rubens' painting 'Landscape with Zeus, Mercury, Philemon and Baukis' (<http://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/1630/?pid=2598&back=576&offset=7&lv=listpackages-5483>). Ask the children to write their own description of the scene facing Baukis and Philemon when the gods take them outside to see what has happened to all their fellow-townsfolk.
Note: Mercury is the Roman name for Hermes.