Who was Nelson Mandela?

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I want you to think about one thing that you really care about or enjoy doing, such as your family, playing on your Xbox, being on a football team, your friends, riding your bike or owning a pet.

You are going to think about how far you would go in order to protect that thing or get to carry on doing it. I’d like everyone to stand up. You can only sit down when you hear something that you would not do to defend or protect the thing you were thinking about.

- Would you give up watching your favourite TV programme?
- Would you give up a week’s pocket money?

Would you give up one year’s worth of Christmas and Birthday presents?

- Would you go without food for a whole day?
- Would you risk getting into trouble?

Some people would go much further than that to protect things that they care about or to change things they think are unfair.

Throughout history, people have risked a great deal to stand up for things that mattered to them; the really important things. Often, this has meant getting into trouble – or even risking their lives – to speak out against something that they believed was wrong.

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Have you heard of Nelson Mandela, What do you know about him? Nelson Mandela was someone who risked everything – including his freedom – to stand up for what he believed was right. He lived in South Africa, at a time when people there were living in a system known as ‘apartheid’. Apartheid meant that the government tried to keep people of different races apart, and that there were very different rules for black people and white people.
Under apartheid, black and white people were not allowed to marry; they had to live in different places and were forced to use separate schools, parks, buses and hospitals. The apartheid Population Registration Act of 1950 led to people being classified in racial groups – sometimes people from the same family were put into different racial groups, forcing families apart. Black South Africans were treated very badly under apartheid, and many were very poor. Can you imagine not being allowed in certain classrooms or shops or toilets, simply because of the colour of your skin? Can you imagine how awful it would have been to be separated from friends and family, because the government decided that people of different races should be kept apart?

Nelson Mandela believed that this racist system was deeply wrong, and became involved in politics to try to stop apartheid. As a result of his political activity, he was sentenced to life in prison and spent 27 years in captivity. After being released, Mandela was elected as the first black president of South Africa. He has since become a hero for many people who wish to see more equality and fairness in the world.

Apartheid ended in 1990. There is now much more equality than there used to be in South Africa and in many other countries around the world. Most people now understand that racism is deeply wrong, and a good deal of that is due to inspiring people like Nelson Mandela, who spoke out to make the world a better place – even when it was not easy, comfortable or safe to do so.

Nelson Mandela showed great courage in speaking out against injustice, and great patience and strength when he was in prison. He also showed forgiveness and gentleness when he was released. Rather than seeking revenge on the people who had imprisoned him for so long, he continued to speak out for peace and for a fairer world.
Despite all he had suffered in prison, and all the racism and hatred he had experienced, Nelson Mandela never lost hope in the power of human beings to love and be kind to one another. He said: ‘No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than [hate].’

Nelson Mandela died at home in South Africa on 5th December 2013. His death has caused much sadness around the world, as people grieve for the inspiring hero that they have lost. But there is so much to celebrate from his extraordinary life, and today we are going to reflect on some of his words.

Nelson Mandela really believed that young people – like you – can make a great difference in the world and he believed that all people should do what they can to live lives full of love, hope and caring for others.

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Throughout his life, he continued always to speak out against poverty and injustice. As an older man, he called on young people to take on the challenge and continue his efforts to end poverty. In 2005, he said: ‘Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be [ended] by the actions of human beings. Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.’

You don’t have to be famous to make a difference or to be part of something great. Often, we can make small changes to have an impact on things that we care about, these might be things that we try to do for the whole world, or they might be things much closer to home.

It can be hard when you are faced with a situation that you want to change – or when something you care about is threatened. But it is
amazing what a difference it can make when lots of people speak out about something that is unfair. Let’s try to make sure that we always speak up about issues that we think are unfair, wherever we encounter them: in our own lives, in our school and in the wider community.

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Let us always remember the words of Nelson Mandela: ‘What matters in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the life of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.’