

When Wisemen Show Ignorance...
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Shabari is a character in the Epic, Ramayana. She was the daughter of King Chitrakavachan. So she was a princess. But she became an Adivasi Bhil woman by the curse of her husband. All the same, her husband Vidihotra promised her that she would be freed from the curse when Shri Ram takes birth on earth.

While Ram and Lakshman living in the forest both the brothers used to visit the Ashrams of Hrushis in the forest. Hearing about the coming of Ram into her forest, Shabari became very happy. "How will I welcome and play host to Shri Ram. Being an Adivasi bhil woman will I be able to receive properly the prince Shri Ram."

Shabari gathered all the different types of food available in the forest. She made preparation to receive Ram with various kinds of fruits and roots grown under the ground as food. But Shabari had one doubt. "Are these foods appropriate to offer Shri Ram to eat? Are they the best?" In order to give the best fruits and eatable roots to Shri Ram Shabari began to taste each fruit and eatable root.

Shri Ram came with Laxman to Shabari's place. They ate the fruits and the roots given by Shabari. Shri Ram did not become angry and punish her for giving him the foods and roots which she had already tasted. On the contrary, Shri Ram was very happy with fruits and roots given to him by Shabari. He freed her from the curse.

This story of Shabari and Shri Ram has a message for each and every thinking person without any discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity or caste. The message is that God sees the inner disposition of a person and not the external things. God sees the inner world of a person. If the heart of a person is pure then the whole person is pure. If his/her values, attitudes and ideals are holy then the whole person is holy. Truth must be the first virtue of every person. Bhagvan Jesus said: "The truth will make you free." The Father of our nation, Gandhiji believed that, Truth is God.

A well known writer and columnist wrote an article in the Gujarati daily, Sandesh on February 12 about Shabari Kumbh Mela being held at Subir in the Dangs District from February 11 to 13, 2006. In his article the author quoted himself about what he spoke to the famous story teller of Ram Katha, Morari Bapu: "Bapu, Jesus has condemned in very strong words, the priests who are engaged in converting people through change from one religion to another." Among those who are strongly against religious conversion the first is Jesus Christ, Gandhiji comes second, Vinoba Bhave comes third, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel comes fourth and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad comes fifth.

"Bapu! now please hear the strong words of Bhagvan Jesus against the priests who convert people. Here are his bitter words, which come in the New Testament of the Bible. 'How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert; and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going

to hell as you yourselves are!’ (Sampurna Bible, translated by Nagindas Parekh and Isudas Cueli, Mathew, page 35).”

According to the above reference the writer took the quotation from the first edition of the complete (Sampurna) Bible in Gujarati published in 1981. For those who look up the actual reference, the quotation is from St. Mathew, chapter 25, verses 15 and the page no. is 50 in the latest 1998 edition.

In his play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare says, “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.” That is to say, a person can quote a holy book like the Bible to serve his selfish motives or hidden purposes.

Here I believe that the writer may not have any hidden agenda in quoting Jesus. But in his enthusiasm to condemn conversion and in his inability to understand what Jesus was saying or perhaps on both these accounts the writer has quoted Jesus out of context.

In this context I think that it is necessary to understand the quotation of Jesus as well as the actual belief of Christians regarding religious conversions.

If we read that quotation of Jesus carefully paying attention to the context, it is clear that Jesus is not speaking against religious conversion but he is denouncing those engaged in conversion – the lawyers and Pharisees. For, instead of leading those converted in the right direction, they are leading the converts into hell. How the Jewish religious leaders lead the new converts to hell is well articulated by Jesus in the sub segment verses.

When we take anything out of its context, then we misuse the thing and mislead the people. This is very well seen in the quotation of the author from the New Testament. Even if a devotee does all the religious rituals and says the prayers with great care and accuracy, still his/her heart can be far away from God!

A person is to keep the right values in his life. But there are very important values and not so important values. Abandoning important values like love, service, mercy, justice, compassion, one goes to perform rituals and keeps only the not so important values, then such a life is neither an intelligent life, nor is it a true religious life. Jesus renounces such a pretentious life. At the same time, Jesus invites the Jewish leaders to lead a true ethical life through such religious practices of truth, love, service, justice, etc in their lives.

These challenges of Jesus to the lawyers, Pharisees and other Jewish leaders go to prove that Jesus is a person who does not make any distinction among people. Here I am reminded of a scene from the play of the famous American short-storyist Oscar Wilde. A village girl tells upper class people who live in luxury without doing any work on their faces: “You are like lepers studded with diamonds. Sometimes you give us alms and throw your old cloths to us wearing yourselves the coat of generosity!” Jesus is castigating such religious leaders who pretend to lead an ethical life.

The writer who says, “Jesus Christ is the number one in speaking against religious conversion in strong words,” may be wise and learned, but in the case of understanding Jesus and his message, he shows not only the depth of his ignorance, but also misleads a large number of his readers!

As a writer myself I am well aware of the power of my words and of the impact of my words on ordinary readers. So I take great care not to mislead my readers with my writings. I make it a point to study in depth especially when I write on religious matters of other faiths. All the same, I know that I am not infallible. So I am always in search of truth and stand by the truth. In this great people like Socrates and Mahatma Gandhi have shown us the way.

Let me conclude this article with an example from Socrates. Once Socrates was going on a public road. There ahead on the road he saw one of his disciples getting out of the door of a notorious prostitute. The disciple too saw his master coming and he quickly disappeared back in the house of the prostitute. When Socrates reached the door, he knocked at the door and called out his disciple and said, “dear friend, it is immoral to visit a prostitute, but it is a good thing that you leave it. So you must get out of this house.”

Today a person does all sorts of gimmicks to prove oneself just and true. If one fails in an examination, it is the fault of the teacher. Jesus is totally against these pretensions. There is only one way for a person to improve. That way is to improve oneself. A person can improve oneself through correcting one’s own failures and shortcoming and walking on the path of love, justice and truth. That is true religion. That is the call of Bhagvan Jesus.