

The Ignorance of the Wise

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Shabari is a character in the Epic Ramayana. She was the daughter of king Chitrakavachen. But she was cursed by her husband to become an Adivasi woman. Her husband Vidhihotren gave her a promise that she would be freed from the curse when Shree Ram would incarnate on the earth.

During the days of his stay in forest Ram and Lakshman used to visit the Ashrams of Maharishis. Shabari was delighted to hear about the arrival of Ram in her jungle. How will I welcome him? Being an Adivasi Bheel woman, will I be able to receive him properly?

Shabari collected all sorts of fruits available in the jungle. She also collected eatable roots of plants to give them to Ram. While thus preparing to receive Ram, Shabari began to doubt if all the things, which she had collected would be good for Ram. Are they the best? In order to give the very best of the forest produce to Ram Shabari tasted each fruit and root.

Shree Ram came with his brother Lakshman. Shree Ram and his brother ate the fruits and the roots given by Shabari. Ram did not scold her for the fruits and roots, which she had already tasted. On the contrary, Shree Ram was very pleased with Shabari's hospitality. So he freed her from the curse.

From this story of Shree Ram and Shabari we can take a thoughtful message irrespective of our different religions that God does not see the external appearance but sees the heart of a person. If the heart of a person is pure and without deceit, then the whole person is pure. If a person's values and ideals of heart are holy then the whole person is holy. Truthfulness must be the first virtue of a person. Jesus Christ has said that the truth will make you free. For our Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, Truth is God.

A famous columnist of Gujarati daily 'Sandesh', Mr Gunvant Shah has written about the Shabari Kumbh Mela (religious festival) which was held at Subir in Dangs District on February 11 to 13, 2006. In his Sunday column in 'Sandesh' Mr. Shah quoted himself what he had told the famous storyteller of Ram Katha, Morari Bapu,

“Bapu, Jesus has strongly condemned the priests who go about converting people from other religion. Jesus Christ comes number one among those who oppose religious conversion. As number two comes Mahatma Gandhi. Vinoba Bhave is number three. Then comes Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as number four. Number five is Mahatma Abdul Kalam Azad. Bapu! Now you hear the condemnation by Jesus as written in the New Testament. These are the bitter words of Bhagavan Jesus who expresses his anger against the priests who convert people:

“ ‘How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convent; and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as you yourselves are!’ (see Sampurna Bible, translators: Nagindas Parekh and Isudas Cueli, Mathew, page 35)”.

Mr. Shah has taken the quotation from the first edition of whole Gujarati Bible. If you want to read the same quotation in some other edition then, you can read it in the Gospel of Mathew, chapter 23 verse 15.

In English there is a famous quotation from Shakespeare “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (The Merchant of Venice 1:3). That is to say, even the devil can use the Bible to achieve his selfish or hidden purpose.

Here I believe that the writer, Mr. Gunvant Shah did not have any selfish or hidden motives. But he was either too eager to deride the conversion works of Christian missionaries or he did not understand properly the words of Jesus in the Bible. Or perhaps influenced by both these persuasions he quoted the above words of Jesus out of context.

In this situation it is fitting and proper to explain here the true meaning of the above quotation from the Bible and also the real understanding of Christians about conversions.

If you read the quotation with attention then you will understand that Jesus is not exactly denouncing religious conversion but he is speaking against the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. For, instead of leading those whom they have converted in the right path they are misleading and making them doubly to deserve hell. How do the Jewish leaders make the new converts twice as deserving of going to hell? This is seen from the list of evils, which Jesus has very strongly denounced against the Jewish leaders just after the above quoted words.

Here in the writing of Mr. Shah we can see that when a thing is taken out of its context, its meaning become misleading. A devotee can do all rituals and prayers and still be far away from God in his heart.

A person is to keep genuine values in his life. But there are both very important and not so important values. If a person abandons important values like love, service justice, mercy, morality and then adheres to such minor virtues like devotion, rituals then the person is not leading a proper life. Such life cannot be identified as true religious life. Jesus condemns hypocritical lives and at the same time invites the Jewish religious leaders to lead a genuine life of love, service, truth, justice and morality.

Those bitter words of Jesus condemning the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees show that Jesus is not a person who goes by mere appearance. Here I am reminded of a scene from the American writer Oscar Wild. A village girl who lives by her hard labour says to the upper class people who lead a luxurious life: “You are like lepers studded with jewels. Sometimes you give us alms and also give us your old clothes. This way you are wearing the coat of generosity!”

Jesus utters the bitter words to such persons of hypocritical morality.

On the basis of this context, a writer who says that Jesus is the number one person opposing religions conversion, may be wise and learned person. But he certainly shows his deep ignorance of Jesus Christ and his message. He also misleads his wide readership that put their trust in him!

As a writer myself, I am well aware of my power as a writer and the response of wide readership. So I am careful in not to mislead my readers in any way with my writings. I am especially careful to read a lot and study deeply when I write anything about other people's religions. Yet I know that I am prone to make mistakes. So I try to continually search for the truth and adhere to the truth always. The great men like Gandhiji and Socrates have shown us the way.

Let me give here an example from the life of Socrates. Once Socrates was walking on a path. Then he saw much ahead of him one of his disciples coming out of the house of a prostitute. But seeing Socrates coming the disciple went back in to the prostitute's house to hide himself from the master. But when Socrates reached the house, he knocked at the door and told his disciple,

“Dear friend, if it is immoral to visit a prostitute; then it is a good thing to leave the house. So you must now come out and leave this house.”

Today a person does all sorts of tricks to prove himself\herself just. If one fails in an examination, the mistake is that of the teacher. Jesus has opposed very strongly any form of hypocrisy. There is only one way for a person to improve. That way is to improve oneself. By correcting one's mistake and by walking in the path of truth and justice a person can improve himself or herself. That is real and genuine religion. That is the call of Jesus Christ.