



Foolish Bridesmaid or Wise Bridesmaid?

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A parable constitutes a genre, which means a literary form. To communicate a complex concept, the parable is employed. Jesus intends to elucidate the concept of Kingdom of God. Kingdom of human king is expressed in terms of space and time. Had the Kingdom of God been on par with the kingdom of human king, Jesus would have utilized the same parameters. When the concept transcends the realm of human experience, it compels one to have recourse to the parable. The parables do not depict historical reports, though the parables are constructed based on mundane matters of life, concrete conventions of society, and routine rituals of community. Therefore, the hearer/reader could associate herself/himself conveniently with one of the characters portrayed in the parable and, while pronouncing verdict on that character, she/he condones or condemns the self unknowingly or knowingly. In the process, the concept is comprehended and the befitting comportment of the hearer/reader is ascertained. In Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus offers the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Since Matthew 25:1-13 is the parable, the reader must refrain researching answers to historical questions such as who was marrying, to whom was he marrying, when was the marriage, where was the marriage, who were

the bridesmaids. The reader may intelligently inquire about the social custom of welcoming the bridegroom in the Israelite Society at the time of Jesus. Jesus may have had relied on the prevailing ceremony of welcoming the bridegroom.¹

The Context

As a child, I witnessed the prolonged program of welcoming the bridegroom and his wedding guests of my Catholic Society in Central Gujarat of India. The bridegroom, along with his wedding guests, arrived after sunset. The date and day of his arrival were prearranged, but not the time. His arrival to the village was announced by bursting a cracker. The family members and relatives of the bride waited and remained ready to hear that bursting any time after the sunset on that appointed day. The bridegroom was escorted by a few elders of the bride's party to a common plot of the locality, from where he would be ushered into the bride's home eventually. Then, playing music, singing, and dancing, the bride's party brought bride's mother from bride's home to welcome the bridegroom. Her mother carried a burning lamp on plater along with other symbolic materials. She came to that spot, where the bridegroom was, and invited him to the bride's home. Only the bride did not participate in the welcome ceremony of the bridegroom. She remained indoors. The mother of the bride was the welcoming personage.

In Israelite Culture, ten bridesmaids constituted the welcoming personages.² Jesus has identified Himself, on occasions, with bridegroom. For example, in responding to the query made by the disciples of John the Baptist apropos of fasting, Jesus equated His disciples with the wedding guests and Himself with the bridegroom (see Matthew 9:14-15). In the parable of wedding banquet, Jesus is the son for whom

the king gives the wedding banquet (see Matthew 22:1-14). In the parable of ten bridesmaids, Jesus is the bridegroom. According to the appraisal done by Jesus, fifty percent of welcoming bridesmaids forfeited their privilege par excellence of ushering the bridegroom on account of their nil preparedness or ill preparedness. The bride is not mentioned at all in this parable. Therefore, it can be easily inferred that Jesus intends His audience to identify themselves with bridesmaids and to evaluate themselves as ill prepared or well prepared to usher Jesus into the wedding banquet, where the bride may be waiting.

My Interpretation

I interpret this parable in this way. The bridegroom is Jesus. The bride in absentia represents those human beings who do not know Jesus as yet. The bridegroom aspires to go to this bride. Jesus longs to embrace every single human being living on this planet. Jesus desires to be proposed to each individual. With this motive, Jesus iterated the mission command at the culmination of His life on earth, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a). The bridesmaids are the baptized Christians, half of whom are ill prepared for this assignment (foolish) and half of whom are well prepared (wise). Where do I stand? Let me examine myself.

I need to become cognizant of the crucial role that I am assigned in God’s Project, namely, to introduce Jesus to those who do not know Him. There are hoards of people around me, who have not even heard the name of Jesus. If the bridesmaid does not bring the bridegroom to the wedding

banquet, the bride may remain waiting the rest of her life. I cannot afford to be ignorant of my expected contribution in spreading the Kingdom of God.

I have my lamp burning that indicates that I am on my mission. However, being foolish, I have not taken oil in a flask that evinces that I lack perseverance in my task. I become impatient. I want to bear witness to Jesus in front of others on my terms. When I have leisure, I want to be with my neighbors who do not know Jesus. I am reluctant to be with them, when they need me. When I have found time, my neighbors are occupied. Hence, I have a handy excuse to slumber. The opportunities come on my way to accompany my neighbors. However, these opportunities cost me my comfort. The best opportunities are when someone feels lonely and isolated, when someone is old and infirm, when someone faces tragedy and calamity, when someone is taken to the police station and prison, when someone is victimized and dying. In such circumstances, do I have oil of self-sacrifice and service-mindedness to be by the side of my suffering neighbor? In the unique parable of Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus demonstrates that the Priest and the Levite had the lamps, but no oil. They could not spare time for the helpless wounded wayfarer. Good Samaritan, too, was on his business, but he had the oil of compassion. He put his own business on hold and prioritized the life of this almost-dead stranger. In my conversation with one Catholic Priest, I was informed that he has donated his kidney to an unknown laborer. While browsing through his Face book, that priest came across an appeal for kidney transplantation. His lamp was burning. He had the oil of self-sacrifice, too. I have observed Scholastics and Seminarians enthusiastically donating blood either in the Blood Donation Drive or

for the neighborhood hospitalized patients. All these make me assess myself that I am ill prepared to introduce Jesus to my neighbors.

As the adage, attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words,” exhorts, I have to live like Jesus amidst my neighbors to introduce Jesus to them. I have to forgive them when they hurt me, I have to bring reconciliation when they litigate, I have to share in their joys when they celebrate, I have to participate in their sorrows when they mourn, I have to confront them when they violate human rights, I have to dialogue with them when I am with them. Even if I had been foolish bridesmaid hitherto, I have potency to be transformed into wise bridesmaid henceforth.

Conclusion

The parable concludes with the foolish bridesmaids being deprived of the honor of welcoming bridegroom. Such a tragic end is intended to induce the urgency in me, had I been an ill-prepared usher of Jesus. Coming to those who do not know Him is the decision of Jesus. Becoming the harbinger of Jesus to them is my mission. My neighbor may be well disposed to receive Jesus at God’s appointed time. Meanwhile, I need to communicate Jesus to my neighbor continuously and constantly through my works and, if need be, words. Silence speaks louder than sentences. Life speaks louder than lectures. May the Lord make us the wise bridesmaids with our lamps burning (works) and our flasks (lives) replenished with oil (virtues)!

Notes

- 1 Harrington expounds engagement and marriage. Israelites of Jesus' time understood marriage more in terms of a civil contract than as a religious ritual. Engagement was taken very seriously and acknowledged to have legal consequences (see Deuteronomy 20:7; 22:23-27). The engagement seems to have been arranged through elders in the family. In rabbinic times (i.e., first century A.D.), minimum ages were set for the male at thirteen and for the female at twelve. Apart from the forbidden degrees of kinship (see Leviticus 18), it was customary to marry within tribes. The engagement took place at the home of the father of the bride, where she was to stay after the engagement. At the engagement, the bridegroom presented the bride and her father with the marriage contract and the so-called bride-price. One or several years might separate the engagement from the marriage. The marriage consisted in the transfer of the bride from her father's home to that of the bridegroom's home or that of his father. See Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 1, edited by Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 36-37.
- 2 According to Harrington, the scene of the parable is the bridegroom's home. Ten bridesmaids await bridegroom's return from the bride's home to which he has gone to determine and sign the marriage contract with the bride's father, and to bring the bride to his own home or that of his father. Since negotiations about the terms of the marriage contract could get involved, perhaps the bridegroom's delay should not be considered unusual. At any rate, his return after dark is assumed since all the bridesmaids took lamps along with them. At his return with his bride, the wedding feast could begin at his own home. See Harrington, 349.
In the Matthean context, this parable is comment on the relation between the Matthean community with its attitude of constant watchfulness in light of the uncertain coming of the Son of Man and their Israelite opponents with their suspicion about apocalyptic and their disinterest in talk about the Son of Man's coming. See Harrington, 351.