

Om Sri Sai Ram

Parable of the Chariot

Short story written for Bala Vikas children, Ghatkopar, Bombay, around 1970

There lived in a village an old man who gathered around him the children of the village and told them many interesting stories. One evening he called all the children and told them the Parable of the Chariot. The story goes ...

Once upon a time there lived a mighty king called Rajendra. He loved his people very much and looked after their welfare with the help of his able ministers. Among his ministers there was one minister called Sevaka whom the king respected very much because of Sevaka's sincerity and dedication to his duty.

One day Sevaka came late to the king's office. King Rajendra asked Sevaka, "Why did you come late to work today?" Sevaka answered politely, "Oh, Mighty King! I am sorry I came late to the office. I walk daily from my home to the office. Today, I have pain in my legs and so I could not walk quickly. Hence, I am late in coming to the office."

King Rajendra was pleased with the honesty of Sevaka and said to him, "Look, Sevaka, I shall give you a chariot, five horses, a charioteer and also enough money to maintain them. You need not walk from home to office anymore."

Sevaka was very happy and accepted the King's offer gratefully. The king gave him a good chariot, five horses and a charioteer and enough money to maintain them. The king also gave Sevaka two folded papers, one green coloured one and the other red coloured. Giving these things to Sevaka, the king said, "After you go home, please open and read the green coloured paper. But do not open the red coloured paper. Only when you are in great difficulties, open the red coloured paper and read it. I shall arrange that as long as you are in my service, your salary will be given regularly to your wife to make you free from unnecessary anxieties."

When Sevaka's wife came to know of the king's offer, she was very happy. When she reached home, he opened the green paper and saw the following words written by the king: "**This chariot is given to you to help you in your royal duties.**" When Sevaka read these words, he understood his obligation to the king and told his wife that he will dedicate his whole time for doing the king's work. His wife also felt very glad to hear her husband's resolve.

Everything was going on nicely for many years. One day a stranger came to Sevaka's house and told him, "Sir, you are a great minister of the mighty King who gave you a good chariot to go to the office. It would be very nice if you could paint your chariot in beautiful colours so that all can see and admire you for your status in the society." Sevaka did not like the stranger's idea but still felt that painting the chariot is harmless. But Sevaka did not have money for buying the paint. The stranger understood the difficulty and said, "I shall give you the paints now, and you can pay me the cost later." So saying, he gave the paints to Sevaka and went away.

Sevaka painted the chariot in beautiful colours. All the people saw it and admired its beauty. As Sevaka was going to the office in the chariot, another stranger accosted him. When the chariot stopped, Sevaka got down and asked the stranger what he wanted. The stranger said, "I do not want anything. I just wanted to say that your chariot is beautiful, but it needs lubrication on the axle so that the wheels can rotate easily and the chariot can move faster when it is drawn by the horses."

Sevaka understood that what the stranger was saying was correct; how could the chariot move easily without any proper lubrication on the axle? But Sevaka did not have money to buy the lubricating oil. The new stranger said that he would lend him some money for buying the oil. Sevaka bought the oil with the borrowed money and applied the oil on the axle of the wheels. Then the chariot moved faster than before and Sevaka was happy.

After some days, another stranger came to Sevaka and said, "Sir, you have a beautiful chariot, which moves very quickly on the road. But it does not look dignified without any decorative carvings of gods and goddesses. These carvings should be made by you to show that you also have skill in the arts." Sevaka heard these words and said to the stranger, "Sir, what you say is alright, but I do not have the money to buy the material for carving the idols of gods and goddesses on the chariot." The stranger said that he will supply all the material, and the price can be paid later. Sevaka agreed and took the material to carve the images of gods and goddesses on his chariot.

Sevaka began carving the idols on his chariot. He became so absorbed in this work that days, weeks and months passed by and he forgot to attend to his office completely. As long as he was going to his duty, the King was sending money to his wife. Since Sevaka did not go to the office for several months, the King stopped sending money to Sevaka's wife. Gradually all the money in the house was exhausted. Then the three strangers who gave him money in advance for paints, oil and art material asked Sevaka to pay their dues. But Sevaka found that there was no money in the house even to buy food. How can he pay anything to these three persons? He was confused and found everything was bad around him. Suddenly, he remembered the King's words: "When you are in great difficulties, open and read the red paper."

Sevaka took the red coloured paper from his box and read it. In that paper, he found the king's words: "The chariot is given to you to come to office and to do king's work. It is not given to you for mere decoration. If you are busy in only decorating the chariot, you will suffer." Then Sevaka realized how foolish he was to forget the king's work. He immediately ran to the king and asked for his pardon. The king said, "I shall pardon you now, but do not repeat this mistake again." So saying the king gave him some money to pay back the three strangers.

Sevaka took the money and gave it to the three strangers and vowed to himself that he will never forget his duty to the king and that whatever repairs are needed, he will approach the king for help.

The children heard the story and asked the old man, "Why did you tell us this story? It is not very interesting as there is no fighting and killing in the story." The old man replied, "My dear children, it is true that there is no fighting or killing in this story but there is a great moral. The

moral is that our body is like the chariot. It is given to us by God to help us to do our duties in God's kingdom. If we ever forget our duty and busy ourselves in keeping the body beautiful, healthy and decorated, we will regret it. We should keep our body beautiful, healthy and decorated only because it belongs to God. Under no circumstances, should we forget God. If we forget God, we shall regret it like Sevaka. Children, when you grow up, please read the *Kathopanishad* where you will learn more about your body and yourself.”

Then all the children were happy, thanked the old man and went back to their homes to sleep.

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Addendum: The chariot with the five horses is symbolic of our body. The chariot is our body and the five horses are our five sense organs. The charioteer is our mind. If the horses pulling a chariot are unruly and undisciplined the chariot will go astray and self-destruct. Similarly, we have to make sure to keep our five sense organs in check, so that our body and life remains on the correct path. Just like the chariot was given to Sevaka to serve the King, our body is given to us to serve God. Just as you need a charioteer to keep the horses and chariot under control, in our lives, we need to have a clear and focused mind, to ensure that our body and life remains stable and disciplined.

Symbolism of Pooja

As part of our spiritual education, the custom of worshipping God is suggested. It is like honoring a guest invited to our house. After offering initial seat and comforts, offer the guest some refreshing drink, and then entertain the guest with a meal. We offer our respects to the guest, and bid a fond farewell on the departure. This is the worldly equivalent but the spiritual meaning of Pooja is “unconditional surrender to God”.

As part of performing Pooja, we usually include the following items: *Dhoopa* – some form of flavoured incense sticks, *Deepa* – lighted lamp, *Pushpa* – offering of flowers, *Naivadya* – offering of a meal, and *Karpooram* – lighted camphor offered at the end of the Pooja.

Each item, after participating in the ritual, leaves behind some leftover. For instance, lighting of *dhoopa*, incense sticks, leaves behind the burnt ash. A lighted lamp leaves behind some burnt residue. Flowers decay. Food offered as *naivadyam* remains with us, and is later consumed by those performing the Pooja.

Only *karpooram*, camphor, leaves no residue behind and it is completely burnt off.

In our quest for unconditional surrender to God, which is the stated purpose of performing Pooja, we must strive to be like the camphor. We must surrender ourselves fully to God so that nothing is left behind.

Story presented to *Bala Vikas* students, early 1970s, Ghatkopar, Bombay.