

The bowl of milk

A Hindu story

Key ideas: worship, priorities, kindness

There was once a king who lived in India. He was a good king who loved his people, and always tried to be fair and just. He also loved God. Every morning he went to the temple to worship. The king took time to say his prayers and sing praises to God. In the temple was a beautiful statue of Shiva. To share his love and respect, the king would bathe the statue with milk each day before he returned to his duties.

One day the king decided to show just how much he loved God. He would take the statue of Shiva, place it in a large bowl and fill it with milk covering the statue. In India this would be a great honour. The king's only problem was that it would take a great deal of milk, so he sent messengers to everyone in his kingdom that they must bring all the milk they had to the temple the following morning. They must not feed the animals, or the children, but must bring every last drop, and pour it into the bowl around the statue of Shiva.

Even before the sun had risen, people began to arrive with their milk to show their respect to Shiva. They brought bowls and buckets and churns full of milk. They brought bottles and barrels and cups full of milk. There were so many people that the king's soldiers had to show them all where they could queue. There were so many people they had to wait a long time to put their milk into the bowl.

The king was pleased as he saw the bowl slowly fill up with milk. He smiled as each person made their offering. But he did not see the sadness in their faces and he did not hear the cries of the babies as they waited with their mothers. For although the adults had water before they came, the babies and young animals could only drink milk and they were hungry. The king was too excited to notice.

As the morning drew to a close, the queue became shorter. The milk was almost at the top of the bowl and the king was pleased. But when the last person had emptied their offering into the bowl, there was still room for more. The king was very sad. He had so wanted to fill the bowl. He knew that there must be some milk left somewhere in his kingdom.

Just as he was about to give up hope, an old woman came into the temple carrying a very small cup half full of milk. She walked up to the huge bowl and emptied her cup into it. The king could not believe his eyes. The bowl filled to the brim and the statue was covered with milk. The king sighed with relief. Now God would know how much the king loved him. But he was curious, so he stopped the old woman and asked her gently 'What is different about your milk? Why did you bring such a small offering.' The woman looked at the king. 'Before I came here, I fed the animals and the children first. I am happy to give what is left to Shiva.' She was afraid. She thought she would be punished.

The king suddenly realised how unkind he had been. He had not heard the cries of the babies, or the animals. God was more pleased with the woman than the king. The king returned to the temple, where he sat quietly to think.