

Five brave men

A Sikh story

Key Ideas: courage, commitment, symbols of belonging, Baisakhi

It was the spring of 1699. The Sikhs had many enemies, including the Emperor of India, who was a Muslim. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth leader of the Sikhs called them together at Baisakhi, an old Indian festival celebrating spring. They were to meet at Anandpur. People came from far and wide, and soon over a hundred thousand Sikhs were gathered together.

On Baisakhi day, after early morning prayers, Guru Gobind Singh stood outside his tent, ready to talk to the huge crowd. He was dressed in military uniform, and held a sword in his hand as he began to speak. A hush fell over the crowd. Everyone seemed to sense the seriousness of the occasion.

The Guru held his sword high, and it glinted in the sun. "Which of you is ready to die for your faith? Who will give his head to prove he is ready to die for what he believes?" A gasp went round the crowd. This was a strange demand from a leader who had always been so kind and gentle. You could hear a pin drop. Then some people in the crowd started to turn and walk away. They thought the Guru had gone mad.

Suddenly one man stepped forward. His name was Daya Ram. He looked his leader in the eye. Daya Ram said he loved God enough to die for him. The people in the crowd held their breath. What would happen next? Guru Gobind Singh took Daya Ram into the tent. There was a swish, and a thud, and blood flowed out. The Guru emerged, his sword dripping red. He demanded another head for God. Most people were terrified by now, but another man plucked up courage, and said that he too was willing to die for God.

Again there was a swish and a thud from inside the tent, and again the Guru emerged, sword dripping. And again, he asked for a head. Another volunteer stepped forward. Twice more the same thing happened, until five men had gone into the tent, and only the Guru had come out.

By now the crowd was much smaller. All those who were afraid, or who thought Gobind Singh was mad, had left. Those who remained were awe-struck by what they had seen. They were even more amazed when, a few moments after the last swish and thud, all five volunteers emerged from the tent with the Guru. All five were dressed in saffron uniforms. All five carried swords.

The Guru announced to the crowd that these five were now his brothers and the first members of the Khalsa, an army of soldiers for God, and a brotherhood where everyone is equal. Each of the five men was given a drink of water and sugar, called amrit, and some was sprinkled over them. By the end of the day nearly all of the people present had taken part in the same ceremony, including the Guru and his wife.

To show that they belonged to the Khalsa, Gobind Singh asked all Sikhs to wear the five symbols of their faith, the five Ks, as a sign that they are all equal. He also gave everyone in the Khalsa a new name to show they belonged. All men should take the name Singh, which means lion, and all women Kaur, meaning princess.

Even today, Baisakhi is a day when many Sikhs take part in the ceremony to show they belong to the Khalsa. They wear the five Ks, and take the name Singh or Kaur.