



The women bent over my hands and feet as I reclined on cushions on their visiting room floor.

**Susan, an Interserve Partner in the Arab World,
on waiting for the bridegroom**

A Muslim wedding

They made elaborate designs in henna, wanting me to look beautiful as I attended my first wedding in their country. They didn't seem to mind doing this service for a virtual stranger, the friend of a friend. They talked and laughed, anticipating the celebration that would take place in two days as their neighbour became a bride.

Just 3 weeks into language school, I didn't understand much of the conversation that flowed around me and my mind wandered. The preparations reminded me of Jesus' story about being ready for a wedding. "Once there were ten young women who took their oil lamps and went out to meet the

bridegroom." "Those women had such easy preparations!" I thought as I sat for hours without moving my hands and feet. "All they had to do was buy some oil for their lamps!"

The next day, the feeling at the house of my new friends is one of expectation—today is the big day! The anticipation intensifies as we spend several hours dressing and perfuming our clothing and hair with incense. Finally we are ready!

As my friends and I arrive at the wedding hall, I discover that in spite of their efforts, I am underdressed. My best dress is nothing compared to those around me! Women who normally look like black ghosts are

now wearing dresses of every colour imaginable (and some combinations that you might not imagine!). Sequins and jewellery glitter everywhere. How beautiful the women are! Their laughing faces reflect their inner strength. Their lives are so difficult—they face poverty, year after year of childbearing, complete lack of self-determination. And yet they find such pleasure in dressing up and even more, in simply being together.

I happily join my friends on cushions on the floor. Music, provided by a band in another room, blares from loudspeakers. Women dance, as their mothers and grandmothers did before them. Finally an announcement is made and the bride arrives, with ➤

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much fanfare! She wears a western-style gown with a hoop skirt at least 3 feet wide; every inch is covered with sequins. She proceeds slowly up the aisle in the middle of the hall, surrounded by young women who chant blessings and hopes for many sons. Once in front of the hall, the bride sits on an ornate, throne-like chair. And the sense of anticipation grows. The climax is yet to come. The music, dancing and visiting isn't our reason for being here. We're waiting for the groom to come! I think again of Jesus' story. He told the story of the wise and foolish virgins because

Finally, the days of preparation and waiting are finished!

he wanted his followers to be ready. These women (and I!) have spent days getting ready for this wedding, but they don't even know about the one to come. How can they possibly be ready when they have no way of knowing the Bridegroom?

The hours stretch on. The conversations grow increasingly desultory and fewer and fewer women dance. My head pounds from the loud music, and I look at my watch. Four hours have passed and still we wait! In Jesus' story, the waiting women fell asleep. They must have booked a different

band, because surely no one could sleep surrounded by music at this decibel level!

Suddenly, the music stops. My ears ring in the silence, and then, over the loudspeakers a voice announces, "The groom is coming!" All around me is a whirlwind of activity. Reclining women suddenly leap to their feet and fly into their overcoats and veils, changing back into black ghosts. Here is the groom! Finally, the days of preparation and waiting are finished!

In Jesus' story, when the groom arrived, there was both joy and sorrow, as some of the bridesmaids discovered that they weren't ready. And for them, it was too late.

"The bridegroom arrived. The five who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast, and the door was closed." (Matt 25:10b-11)

In the middle of all the rejoicing, my heart is heavy. My friends here are not ready for the wedding that's to come. They've never met the Bridegroom. Seeing them with covered faces reminds me again of how it veils their hearts and makes it impossible for them to see God clearly. They cannot understand how He loves them and longs for a relationship with them. I look forward to a wedding feast with Someone who calls me His beloved. All they have is a set of rules to try to keep, and a faint hope that a capricious judge will be kind.

In spite of the stranglehold of Islam in the country, I have hope that God is working here and that my friends will be part of the final marriage celebration. Please join the work here by praying that hearts will be open to the wooing of the Bridegroom. ■

