

Sermon 209: What will you do with this vast house in this world...

Amir al-mu'minin went to enquire about the health of his companion al-'Ala' ibn Ziyad al-Harithi and when he noticed the vastness of his house he said:

(ومن كلام له (عليه السلام

بالبصرة، وقد دخل على العلاء بن زياد الحارثي - وهو من أصحابه - يعود، فلما رأى سعة داره قال

What will you do with this vast house in this world, although you need this house more in the next world. If you want to take it to the next world you could entertain in it guests and be regardful of kinship and discharge all (your) obligations according to their accrual. In this way you will be able to take it to the next world.

مَا كُنْتُ تَصْنَعُ بِسِعَةِ هَذِهِ الدَّارِ فِي الدُّنْيَا، أَنْتَ إِلَيْهَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ كُنْتُ أَحْوَجُ؟ وَبَلَى إِنْ شِئْتَ بَلَغْتَ بِهَا الْآخِرَةَ، تَقْرِي فِيهَا الضَّيْفَ، وَتَصِلُ فِيهَا الرَّحِمَ، وَتُطْلِعُ مِنْهَا الْحُقُوقَ مَطَالِعَهَا، فَإِذَا أَنْتَ قَدْ بَلَغْتَ بِهَا الْآخِرَةَ

Then al-'Ala' said to him: O' Amir al-mu'minin, I want to complain to you about my brother 'Asim ibn Ziyad.

Amir al-mu'minin enquired: What is the matter with him?

al-'Ala' said: He has put on a woollen coat and cut himself away from the world.

Amir al-mu'minin said: Present him to me.

فقال له العلاء: يا أمير المؤمنين، أشكو إليك أخي عاصم بن زياد. قال: وما له؟ قال: لبس العباءة وتخلّى من الدنيا. قال: عليّ به.

When he came Amir al-mu'minin said: O enemy of yourself. Certainly, the evil (Satan) has misguided you. Do you feel no pity for your wife and your children? Do you believe that if you use those things which Allah has made lawful for you, He will dislike you? You are too unimportant for Allah to do so.

He said: O Amir al-mu'minin, you also put on coarse dress and eat rough food.

Then he replied: Woe be to you, I am not like you. Certainly, Allah, the Sublime, has made it obligatory on true leaders that they should maintain themselves at the level of low people so that the poor do not cry over their poverty. [1](#)

فلما جاء قال: يَا عُدَيَّ نَفْسِي! لَقَدْ اسْتَهَامَ بِكَ الْخَبِيثُ! أَمَّا رَحِمْتَ أَهْلَكَ وَوَلَدَكَ! أَتَرَى اللَّهَ أَحَلَّ لَكَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ، وَهُوَ يَكْرَهُ أَنْ تَأْخُذَهَا! أَنْتَ أَهْوَنُ عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْ ذَلِكَ! قال: يا أمير المؤمنين، هذا أنت في خشونة ملابسك وجشوبة مأكلك! قال: وَيُحَكِّ، إِنِّي لَسْتُ كَأَنْتَ، إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى فَرَضَ عَلَى أُمَّةِ الْعَدْلِ أَنْ يُقَدِّرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ بِضَعْفَةِ النَّاسِ، كَيْلًا يَتَبَيَّعَ بِالْفَقِيرِ فَقْرَهُ!

Alternative Sources for Sermon 209

- (1) Abu Talib al-Makki, *Qut*, I, 531;
- (2) Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd*, I, 329;
- (3) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, I, 410;
- (4) al-Zamakhshari, *Rabi'*, IV, *bab al-lahw wa al-ladhdhat*;
- (5) al-Mufid, *al-'Ikhtisas*, 152;
- (6) Ibn al-Jawzi, *Talbis Iblis*, 194.

[1.](#) From ancient days asceticism and the abandonment of worldly attachments has been regarded as a means of purification of the spirit and important for the character. Consequently, those who wished to lead a life of abstemiousness and meditation used to go out of the cities and towns to stay in forests and caves in the mountains and stay there concentrating on Allah according to their own conception. They would eat only if a casual traveller or the inhabitant of nearby dwellings gave them anything to eat, otherwise they remained contented with the fruits of wild trees and the water of the streams, and thus they passed their life. This way of worship commenced in a way that was forced by the oppression and hardships of rulers. Certain people left their houses and, in order to avoid their grip, hid themselves in some wilderness or cave in a mountain, engaging themselves in worship of and devotion to Allah. Later on, this forced asceticism acquired a voluntary form and people began to retire to caves and hollows of their own volition. Thus it became an accepted way that whoever aimed at spiritual development retired to some corner after severing himself from all worldly ties. This method remained in vogue for centuries and even now some traces of this way of worship are found among the Buddhists and the

Christians.

The moderate views of Islam do not, however, accord with the monastic life, because for attaining spiritual development it does not advocate the abandonment of worldly enjoyments and successes, nor does it view with approbation that a Muslim should leave his house and fellow men and busy himself in formal worship, hiding in some corner. The conception of worship in Islam is not confined to a few particular rites, but it regards the earning of one's livelihood through lawful means, mutual sympathy and good behaviour, and co-operation and assistance also to be important constituents of worship. If an individual ignores worldly rights and obligations and does not fulfil his responsibility towards his wife and children, nor occupies himself in efforts to earn a livelihood, but all the time stays in meditation, he ruins his life and does not fulfil the purpose of living. If this were Allah's aim, what would have the need for creating and populating the world when there was already a category of creatures who were all the time engaged in worshipping and adoration.

Nature has made man to stand on the cross-roads at which the midway is the centre of guidance. If he deviates from this point of moderateness even a bit, this way or that way, there is sheer misguidance for him. That midway is that he should neither bend towards this world to such an extent as to ignore the next life, devoting himself entirely to this one, nor should he abstain from this world so as not to have any connection with anything of it, confining himself to some corner leaving everything else. Since Allah has created man in this world he should follow the code of life for living in this world, and should partake of the comforts and pleasures bestowed by Allah within moderate limits. The eating and using of things made lawful by Allah is not against Allah's worship, but rather Allah has created these things for the very purpose that they should be taken advantage of. That is why those who were the chosen of Allah lived in this world with others and ate and drank like others. They did not feel the need to turn their faces away from the people of the world, and to adopt the wilderness or the caves of mountains as their abodes, or to live in distant spots. On the other hand they remembered Allah, remained disentangled from worldly affairs, and did not forget death despite the pleasures and comforts of life.

The life of asceticism sometimes produces such evils as ruin the next life also as well as this one, and such an individual proves to be the true picture of "the looser in this life as well as the next." When natural impulses are not satisfied in the lawful and legal way the mind turns into a centre of evil-ideas and becomes incapable of performing worship with peace and concentration; and sometimes passions so overcome the ascetic that breaking all moral fetters, he devotes himself completely to their satisfaction and consequently falls in an abyss of ruin for which it is impossible to extract himself. That is why religious law accords a greater position to the worship performed by a family man than that by a non-family man, because the former can exercise mental peace and concentration in the worship and rituals.

Individuals who put on the cloak of Sufism and make a loud show of their spiritual greatness are cut off from the path of Islam and are ignorant of its wide teachings. They have been misled by Satan and, relying on their self-formed conceptions, tread wrongful paths. Eventually their misguidance becomes so serious that they begin to regard their leaders as having attained such a level that their word is as the word of Allah and their act is as the act of Allah. Sometimes they regard themselves beyond all the bounds and limitations of religious law and consider every evil act to be lawful for them. This deviation from faith and irreligiousness is named Sufism (complete devotion to Allah). Its unlawful principles are called "at-tariqah" (ways of achieving communion with Allah) and the followers of this cult are known as Sufis. First of all Abu Hashim al-Kufi and Shami adopted this nickname. He was of Umayyad descent and a fatalist (believing that man is bound to act as pre-ordained by Allah). The reason for giving him this name was that, in order to make a show of his asceticism and fear for Allah, he put on a woollen cloak. Later on this nickname became common and various grounds were put forth as the basis of this name. For example, one ground is that 'Sufi' has three letters, "sad", "waw" and "fa". "sad" stands for "sabr" (endurance), "sidq" (truthfulness) and "safa" (purity of heart); "waw" stands for "wudd" (love), "wird" (repeating Allah's name) and "wafa" (faithfulness to Allah), and "fa" stands for "fard" (unity), "faqr" (destitution) and "fana" (death or absorption in Allah's Self). The second view is that it has been derived from "as-Suffah", which was a platform near the Prophet's mosque which had a covering of date-palm leaves. Those who stayed there were called Ashabu'Suffah (people of the platform). The third view is that the name of the progenitor of an Arab tribe was Sufah, and this tribe performed the duties of serving the pilgrims and the Ka'bah, and it is with reference to their connection with this tribe that these people were called Sufis. This group is divided among various sects but the basic sects are seven only.

1) al-Wahdatiyyah (unitarian):

This sect believes in the oneness of all existence. Its belief is that everything of this world is Allah, so much so that they

assign to even polluted things the same godly position. They liken Allah with the river and the waves rising in it, and argue that the waves which sometimes rise and sometimes fall have no separate existence other than the river, but their existence is exactly the existence of the river. Therefore, nothing can be separated from its own existence.

2) al-Ittihadīyyah (the unitists):

They believe that they have united with Allah and Allah has united with them. They liken Allah with fire and themselves with iron that lies in the fire and acquires its form and property.

3) al-Hulūliyyah (the formists):

Their belief is that Allah takes the form of those who claim to know Him and the perfect ones, and their bodies are places of His stay. In this way, they are seemingly men but really Allah.

4) al-Wasīliyyah (the combiners):

This sect considers itself to have combined with Allah. Their belief is that the laws of the shari`ah are a means of development of human personality and character, and that when the human self combines with Allah it no more needs perfection or development. Consequently, for the "wasilin", worship and ritual become useless, because they hold that when truth and reality is achieved shari`ah remains of no avail. Therefore, they can do anything and they cannot be questioned.

5) az-Zarraqiyyah (the revellers):

This sect regards vocal and instrumental music as worship, and earns the pleasures of this world through a show of asceticism and begging from door to door. They are ever engaged in relating concocted stories of miraculous performances of their leaders to over-awe the common people.

6) al-`Ushshaqiyyah (the lovers):

The theory of this sect is that apparency is the means to reality, meaning that carnal love is the means to achieve love of Allah. That is, in order to reach the stage of Allah's love it is necessary to have love with some human beauty. But the love which they regard as love for Allah is just the product of mental disorder through which the lover inclines to one individual with all his attention and his final aim is to have access to the beloved. This love can lead to the way of evil and vice, but it has no connection with the love of Allah.

A Persian couplet says: The truth of the fact is that carnal love is like a jinn and a jinn cannot give you guidance.

7) at-Talqiniyyah (the encounterers):

According to this sect, the reading of religious sciences and books of scholarship is thoroughly unlawful. Rather, the position that is achieved by an hour of spiritual effort of the Sufis cannot be achieved by seventy years of reading books.

According to Shi`ah `Ulama' all these sects are on the wrong path and out of the fold of Islam. In this connection, numerous sayings of the Imams are related. In this sermon also Amir al-mu'minin has regarded the severance of `Asim ibn Ziyad from this world as the mischief of Satan, and he forcefully dissuaded him from adopting that course. (For further study, see Sharh Nahjul Balaghah, al-Hajj Mirza Habibu'llah al-Khu'i, vol. 13, pp. 132-417; vol. 14, pp. 2-22).

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