

Sermon 5: O people, steer clear through the waves of mischief...

Delivered when the Holy Prophet died and ‘Abbas ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib and Abu Sufyan ibn Harb offered to pay allegiance to Amir al-mu’minin for the Caliphate

(ومن كلام له (عليه السلام) لما قبض رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله

وخاطبه العباس وأبوسفیان فی أن یبایعاه له بالخلافة

: (وذلك بعد أن تمت البيعة لأبي بكر في السقيفة، وفيها ينهى عن الفتنة ويبين عن خلقه وعلمه)

O People! ¹

Steer clear through the waves of mischief by boats of deliverance, turn away from the path of dissension and put off the crowns of pride. Prosperous is one who rises with wings (i.e. when he has power) or else he remains peaceful and others enjoy ease. It (i.e. the aspiration for Caliphate) is like turbid water or like a morsel that would suffocate the person who swallows it. One who plucks fruits before ripening is like one who cultivated in another's field.

النهي عن الفتنة

أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، شُقُّوا أُمُوجَ الْفِتَنِ بِسُفُنِ النَّجَاةِ، وَعَرِّجُوا عَنْ طَرِيقِ الْمُتَافَرَةِ، وَضَعُوا تِيجَانَ الْمُفَاخَرَةِ. أَفْلَحَ مَنْ نَهَضَ
بِجَنَاحٍ، أَوْ اسْتَسْلَمَ فَأَرَاخَ، مَاءً آجِنٌ، وَلُقْمَةً يَعْصُ بِهَا أَكْلُهَا، وَمُجْتَنِي الثَّمَرَةَ لِعَيْرِ وَقْتِ إِنْبَاعِهَا كَالزَّارِعِ بَغَيْرِ أَرْضِهِ.

If I speak out they would call me greedy towards power but if I keep quiet they would say I was afraid of death. It is a pity that after all the ups and downs (I have been through). By Allah, the son of Abu Talib² is more familiar with death than an infant with the breast of its mother. I have hidden knowledge, if I disclose it you will start trembling like ropes in deep wells.

خلقه وعلمه

فَإِنْ أَقْلُ يَقُولُوا: حَرَصَ عَلَى الْمُلْكِ، وَإِنْ أَسْكُتَ يَقُولُوا: جَزَعَ مِنَ الْمَوْتِ! هَيْهَاتَ بَعْدَ اللَّتَا وَالَّتِي! وَاللَّهِ لَأَبْنُ أَبِي طَالِبٍ أَنَسُ بِالْمَوْتِ مِنَ الطِّفْلِ بِتَدْيِ أُمِّهِ، بَلِ انْدَمَجْتُ عَلَى مَكْنُونِ عِلْمٍ لَوْ بَحْتُ بِهِ لَأَضْطَرَبْتُمُ اضْطِرَابَ الْأَرْشِيَةِ فِي الطَّوِيِّ الْبَعِيدَةِ!

Alternative Sources for Sermon 5

(1) Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, *Tadhkirah*, bab 6, 137;

(2) al-Tabarsi, *al-Ihtijaj*, I, 127;

(3) al-Bayhaqi, *al-Mahasin*, II, 139, see 'Arshi.

1. When the Holy Prophet died Abu Sufyan was not in Medina. He was coming back when on his way he got the news of this tragedy. At once he enquired who had become the leader and Chief. He was told that people had paid allegiance to Abu Bakr. On hearing this the acknowledged mischief-monger of Arabia went into deep thought and eventually went to `Abbas ibn `Abd al-Muttalib with a proposal. He said to him, "Look, these people have by contrivance made over the Caliphate to the Taym and deprived Banu Hashim of it for good, and after himself this man would place over our heads a haughty man of Banu `Adi. Let us go to `Ali ibn `Abi Talib and ask him to get out of his house and take to arms to secure his right."

So taking `Abbas with him he came to `Ali and said: "Let me your hand; I pay allegiance to you and if anyone rises in opposition I would fill the streets of Medina with men of cavalry and infantry." This was the most delicate moment for Amir al-mu'minin. He regarded himself as the true head and successor of the Prophet while a man with the backing of his tribe and party like Abu Sufyan was ready to support him. Just a signal was enough to ignite the flames of war. But Amir al-mu'minin's foresight and right judgement saved the Muslims from civil war as his piercing eyes perceived that this man wanted to start civil war by rousing the passions of tribal partisanship and distinction of birth, so that Islam should be struck with a convulsion that would shake it to its roots.

Amir al-mu'minin therefore rejected his counsel and admonished him severely and spoke forth the words, whereby he has stopped people from mischief mongering, and undue conceit, and declared his stand to be that for him there were only two courses – either to take up arms or to sit quietly at home. If he rose for war there was no supporter so that he could suppress these rising insurgencies. The only course left was quietly to wait for the opportunity till circumstances were favourable.

Amir al-mu'minin's quietness at this stage was indicative of his high policy and far-sightedness, because if in those circumstances Medina had become the centre of war its fire would have engulfed the whole of Arabia in its flames. The discord and scuffle that had already begun among muhajirun (those who came from Mecca) and ansar (the locals of

Medina) would have increased to maximum, the wire-pullings of the hypocrites would have had full play, and Islam's ship would have been caught in such a whirlpool that its balancing would have been difficult; Amir al-mu'minin suffered trouble and tribulations but did not raise his hands.

History is witness that during his life at Mecca the Prophet suffered all sorts of troubles but he was not prepared to clash or struggle by abandoning patience and endurance, because he realised that if war took place at that stage the way for Islam's growth and fruition would be closed. Of course, when he had collected supporters and helpers enough to suppress the flood of unbelief and curb the disturbances, he rose to face the enemy. Similarly, Amir al-mu'minin, treating the life of the Prophet as a torch for his guidance refrained from exhibiting the power of his arm because he was realising that rising against the enemy without helpers and supporters would become a source of revolt and defeat instead of success and victory.

Therefore, on this occasion Amir al-mu'minin has likened the desire for Caliphate to turbid water or a morsel suffocating the throat. Thus, even where people had forcibly snatched this morsel and wanted to swallow it by forcible thrusting, it became stuck in their throat. They could neither swallow it nor vomit it out. That is, they could neither manage it as is apparent from the blunders they committed in connection with Islamic injunctions, nor were they ready to cast off the knot from their neck.

He reiterated the same ideas in different words thus: "If had I attempted to pluck the unripe fruit of Caliphate then by this the orchard would have been desolated and I too would have achieved nothing, like these people who cultivate on other's land but can neither guard it, nor water it at proper time, nor reap any crop from it. The position of these people is that if I ask them to vacate it so that the owner should cultivate it himself and protect it, they say how greedy I am, while if I keep quiet they think I am afraid of death.

They should tell me on what occasion did I ever feel afraid, or flew from battle-field for life, whereas every small or big encounter is proof of my bravery and a witness to my daring and courage. He who plays with swords and strikes against hillocks is not afraid of death. I am so familiar with death that even an infant is not so familiar with the breast of its mother. Hark! The reason for my silence is the knowledge that the Prophet has put in my bosom. If I divulge it you would get perplexed and bewildered. Let some days pass and you would know the reason of my inaction, and perceive with your own eyes what sorts of people would appear on this scene under the name of Islam, and what destruction they would bring about. My silence is because this would happen, otherwise it is not silence without reason."

A Persian hemistich says: "Silence has meaning which cannot be couched in words."

[2.](#) About death Amir al-mu'minin says that it is so dear to him that even an infant does not so love to leap towards the source of its nourishment while in its mother's lap. An infant's attachment with the breast of its mother is under the effect of a natural impulse but the dictates of natural impulses change with the advance of age. When the limited period of infancy ends and the infant's temperament changes, he does not like even to look at what was so familiar to him but rather turns his face from it in disgust.

But the love of prophets and saints for union with Allah is mental and spiritual, and mental and spiritual feelings do not change, nor does weakness or decay occur in them. Since death is the means and first rung towards this goal their love for death increases to such an extent that its rigours become the cause of pleasure for them and its bitterness proves to be the source of delight for their taste.

Their love for it is the same as that of the thirsty for the well or that of a lost passenger for his goal. Thus when Amir al-mu'minin was wounded by `Abd ar-Rahman ibn Muljam's fatal attack, he said, "I was but like the walker who has reached (the goal) or like the seeker who has found (his object) and whatever is with Allah is good for the pious." The Prophet also said that there is no pleasure for a believer other than union with Allah.

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