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Significance of the Months of Muharram & Safar in Islam

The months of Muharram and Safar offer the yearly opportunity to commemorate the martyrdom of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A), the grandson of the Prophet (S) and the third Imam of the Shiite Muslims, at Karbala' on the tenth of Muharram in the year 61. The tragedy and heroism of the event, the resistance and self-sacrifice of the martyrs, are remembered during these days by the Shi`ah and the Ahl al-Sunnah alike, and by the Shi`ah with a special ardour, fervour and enthusiasm.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the ardour and enthusiasm inspired by the martyrs of Karbala' is something unsurpassed in the history of religions. No individual or group in the history of the world has attracted such sustained admiration and love in the hearts of their followers as the martyrs of Karbala' and in particular the figure of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A), an admiration which has not dwindled in the course of more than thirteen and a half centuries that have elapsed since that event.

Significance of the Month for Shi'ah Muslims

Mourning ceremonies are held by Muslims throughout Muharram and Safar, and in gatherings which are called `*majalis*' (sing. *majlis*) elegies are recited and sermons are delivered from the *minbar*, the Islamic pulpit, in which the sufferings undergone by al-Imam al-Husayn, the members of his household and his companions are narrated. For the Shi'ah sect, the *majlis* and the sermons delivered therein are the primary source of religious education for the children, the illiterate and even educated adults.

However, with the general decline and deterioration in the Muslim Ummah, of which the Shi'ah community is a part, the great educative potential of the *majlis* has slowly eroded, to the extent that not only the great educative purpose that lies behind mourning for al-Imam al-Husayn has been forgotten, the *majalis* has become a platform for intensification of sectarian animosities and propagation of misconceived beliefs that conflict with the spirit of the Islamic faith. With the general decline of the Islamic culture there has been a parallel deterioration in the educative level of the sermons that are

delivered from the *minbar*.

The spreading ignorance and inertia of the *majlis* audience has laid diminishing demands on the learning and capacity of the religious speaker, called `*dhakir*' in India and Pakistan and *rawdeh khan* in Iran and Iraq. The lamentable ignorance of the masses and the deplorable negligence or absence of the sense of duty on the part of many *dhakir*s have converted most majalis into mere sources of nourishment of sectarian conceits and delusions.

Shi'ism, which implies a voluntary and aware choice to shoulder greater responsibility as member of the Ummah and devoted obedience to the *wajib al-'ita'ah* (i.e. those whose obedience is obligatory) Imams of the Household of the Prophet (A), its meaning has gradually degenerated into a mere emotional attachment for the Ahl al-Bayt (A), devoid of any sense of ethical or social responsibility for the present-day condition of Islam and Muslims.

We, the self-declared Shi'ah of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A), should pause and meditate at the answer given by him to a man who proclaimed to the Imam, "**O son of the Prophet, I am one of your Shi'ah**." Al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A) said to him:

Fear God, and do not make such a claim that God, the Almighty, should say to you, "You lied insolently by making this claim." Indeed our Shi'ah is one whose heart is free from every kind of deception, adulteration, hatred, malice, and corruption. If you are not such then say, "I am one of your admirers and supporters."

The Responsibility of the Dhakir

The Qur'an repeatedly calls its audience to meditate about its verses and to draw instruction from them,

What, do they not meditate in the Quran? .... (***4:82***)

What do they not meditate in the Quran? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts? (***47:24***)

A Book We have sent down to thee, blessed, that men of understanding may ponder its verses and so remember. (***38:29***)

Whereas the Holy Book calls the believers to emulate the Prophet (S) as the sublimest model of humanhood,

You have a good example in God's Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God oft. (***33:21***)

the *dhakir* struggles to project the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A) as supernatural beings to be admired and extolled, not to be imitated and obeyed. He strives to drive home the point that the Qur'an is understandable only for God or the Holy Prophet (S) or the Imams (A), a book of sacred and abstruse

meanings opaque to human understanding, a book so holy that it is impertinent even to try to understand it.

The Duty of Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil

The Qur'an and *hadith* lay great emphasis on the duty of *al-'amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar*, and it is recognized as one of the most important duties of Muslims in general and the `ulama' in particular.

Unfortunately this duty is discreetly shunned by the *dhakir* who is averse to disturb the complacence of his audience and to venture to guide them at the cost of his own popularity. The strategy of connivance, though full of perils in the Hereafter, yields immediate returns.

The strategy of reducing (seemingly, elevating) the *wajib al-ita'ah* Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), obedience to whom is obligatory, into holy inimitable metaphysical figure-heads to be admired and implored in supplications for worldly benefits, may serve to attract applausing crowds but does no service to the religion of God and does no justice to the great teachers of mankind, which the Ahl al-Bayt (A) in fact were.

In some cases the attitude goes further than mere connivance, where the *dhakir* tries to soothe and appease bad religious conscience by proving on his own authority that absence of obedience to the commands of the religion of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) will not hurt the believer as long as he remains their passionate admirer, as if such a thing were possible.

When such disastrous attitudes are consciously cultivated among the people, when the mourning assemblies-which were originally instituted to propagate the message of al-Imam al-Husayn - are held without paying any attention to *al-'amr bil ma`ruf wa al-nahy`an al-munkar* and to the sublime goals of al-Imam al-Husayn and the sacred purposes behind his resistance against the regime of Yazid, it is not strange that those goals should gradually lose their relevance in the Muslim society, and the *ahkam* should become unimportant for the Muslim masses.

The Sermon of al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (A)

The following sermon of al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (A) delivered during Mu'awiyah's reign at the time of Hajj in a gathering of eminent personalities of the period, not only shows the kind of issues that should be discussed during Hajj, but also is a good guideline for sermons which are delivered in *majalis* during Muharram and Safar:

O people! Take a lesson from God's warning to His friends through His censure on the rabbis, when He says:

Why do the bishops and rabbis not forbid them to utter sin, [*and consume the unlawful? Evil is*

the thing they are doing.] (*5:63*)

And when He says:

Cursed were the unbelievers of the Children of Israel by the tongue. of David, and of Jesus, Mary's son; that for their rebelling and their transgression. They forbade not one another any dishonour that they committed; surely evil were the things that they did. (*5:78-79*)

God has reproved them because they beheld the open vices and corruption of the oppressors, but did not forbid them from that on account of attachment to their favours and fear of what periled them. Whereas God says: ...So fear not men, but fear me .... (*5:44*)

And He says:

And the believers, the men and the women, are friends of one another; they bid to honour and forbid dishonour (*i.e. perform the duty of al- amr bil ma'ruf wd al-nahy `an al-munkar*)***, they perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and they obey God and His Messenger. They-upon them God shall have mercy; God is Almighty, All-wise.*** (*9:71*)

God mentions the duty of al-amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar before all other duties, because He knows that if it is performed and established in the society all other duties, the easy and the difficult, are also established. That is why al-amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy`an al-munkar signifies invitation to Islam together with resistance against injustice, opposition to the oppressor, [proper] division of the public funds and booty, collection of alms and their correct distribution.

Then you, O company of men well-known for your learning! You, who have a good name and are known [among the people] for your goodwill. God has given you honour with the people. The illustrious venerate you and the weak respect you. You. are preferred by him over whom you have no merit and over whom you have no power. The deprived seek your intercession in need, and you walk on the road with the majesty of kings and princes. Is it not that you have such honour and dignity because people place their hopes in you to stand for the establishment of Divine duties?

If you fail to discharge most of those duties, then you have scorned the duties of leaders. You have forfeited the rights of the weak, though you have obtained your own claims. Neither you had to sacrifice your wealth nor endanger your lives for the sake of Him Who created you. Nevertheless, you desire that God should put you in the Paradise in the neighbourhood of His apostles, and you hope to be safe from His chastisement.

Indeed I am afraid that you who harbour such hopes from God shall have to taste His vengeance. Because God had honoured you and raised you in station above others, for there are many

servants of God who are not held in such high esteem as God has granted you among the people. God's covenants are broken before your very eyes, yet you are not dismayed, although you are alarmed if some of your ancestral compacts are endangered; as if the compact of the Messenger of Allah (S) were some insignificant and paltry thing!

The blind, the dumb and the handicapped in towns are without protection and mercy, but you neither act as demanded by your high station nor care and have regard for one who attends to them. You have made your own life safe and secure by getting along with the oppressors and showing lenience and connivance in regard to their injustices, which God had commanded you to oppose and forbid.

Indeed if you understand, the calamity that has befallen you is greater than the one which afflicts the people; because you have failed to safeguard the responsibility of the learned. Since the implementation of the laws and running of the affairs lie with the men of Divine knowledge, who are custodians of His [laws regarding the] haram and halal.

But you have been wrested of this status. And it was not taken away from you except for your departure from righteousness, and on account of your disagreement regarding the Sunnah, after that it had been made clear and evident to you.

Had you the endurance to put up with adversities and hardships for the sake of God, the affairs of God would have returned into your hands and your lost authority would have turned to you again. But you allowed the oppressors to take your place and handed over the affairs of God into their hands, that they may act dubiously and indulge in their lusts.

They got their authority because of your running away from death [which is inevitable] and due to your love of life, which shall [anyhow] depart from you. In this fashion, you submitted the weak into their hands, to be enslaved and exploited, permitting them to run the affairs of the country according to their whims, and to make ignominy their way of life through their [unchecked] desires, following the perverse and disobeying the Almighty.

They have appointed a loud-voiced orator for every pulpit in every town, and the country lies open and unprotected at their mercy. Their hands are free to do whatever they like, and the defenseless people are at the disposal of their mercy. Among them are merciless tyrants who oppress the weak, and men of authority who know neither the creation nor the Day of Resurrection.

It is surprising-and why shouldn't I be surprised-when the country is in the hands of a faithless tyrant and the ruler of the believers is one who has no mercy for them. Indeed God is a judge between us in our disputes and contentions.

My God, You Know that whatever I have said is not for the sake of rivalry for power, nor for the

sake of futile vanities of the world, but because we desire establishment of the landmarks of Thy religion, reform in Thy lands, security of Thy oppressed creatures, and the practice of Thy commands and the duties laid down by Thee.

And you, [O company of the elect of the Ummah] , assist us and do us due justice. The oppressors have power over you and they act to extinguish the light of your Prophet (S).

And God suffices us, and in Him we put our trust. Towards Him do we turn, and towards Him all things shall return.

The present situation in the Muslim world is no better than the conditions that prevailed during the later decades of the life of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A). All way-marks of the Islamic culture have been washed away in the deluge of modern paganism. The greater part of the Muslim world is under direct or indirect domination of non-Muslims. The sad signs described in a prediction of al-Imam `Ali (A) have already come true:

A time will come when nothing will remain of the Qur'an except its script, and nothing of Islam except its name. The mosques in those days will be flourishing with regard to architecture, but desolate with regard to guidance. Those staying in them and those visiting them will be the worst of all on the earth. From them mischief will spring up and towards them all wrong will turn. If anyone isolates himself from it (mischief) they will fling him back towards it, and if anyone hesitates, they will push him towards it ....

Contextualizing the Struggle with the Current State of Muslims

In such conditions how can any discourse about the great struggle of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (A) be unaccompanied with a discussion of the lamentable condition of the Muslim Ummah? Is it not the height of callousness and even hypocrisy to pass by in silence the aims and ideals for which he took a stand against the regime of Yazid and sacrificed everything?

Is it not the very extreme of injustice to deprive the Muslim children and adults of the great potential of the *majalis* which are held in the memory of al-Imam al-Husayn (A)? Is it right not to use the great devotion of the Muslim masses to the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and their great enthusiasm and zeal during the months of Muharram and Safar-a time when the hearts are softened by the stupendous tragedy of Karbala' to receive the teachings of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives with al-Imam al-Husayn-to inform and educate our children and adults about the *ahkam* of the *Shari'ah* and the *akhlaq* of the Ahl al-Bayt (A)?

The Shiites have admired `Ali and his sons (A), their leaders and guides, for centuries, and wept over accounts of their sufferings. Is it not time that we should start following them in deed, in all walks of our life? After all they are our Imams, our leaders and our teachers, who underwent those sufferings and

hardships in order to instruct us and guide us on the Straight Path of Allah? Should we not question our sincerity if we persist in our refusal to be benefited by their efforts to improve our lot, to purify our souls and to guide our intellects?

The *majlis* should inform and instruct. It should inspire and enlighten. Like al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (A), his *dhakir*, who occupies the *minbar* of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), should aim at resurrecting the spirit of Islam and the message of the Qur'an. The *majlis* should instruct the people in the usul and the *ahkam* of the *Shari'ah* and the *akhlaq* of the Imams (A). If the *majalis* of al-Imam al-Husayn (A) do not help our youths and adults to understand Islam profoundly, who else can stop them from falling into the clutches of deviate philosophical schools and from being swept away by the tide of the pagan Western culture?

Would it not be more beneficial to discuss the great merits of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) as ideal human beings and ideal teachers of mankind, instead of discussing them as metaphysical entities to be revered but not to be obeyed, to be glorified but not to be emulated, to be invoked for assistance in worldly needs and affairs and to be ignored in vital matters of our duties, obligations, and responsibilities as Muslims?

Only when our *majalis* become classes. for dissemination of the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) which lie buried in *hadith* texts, only when our *majalis* become platforms of Muslim unity instead of being instruments of division and disunity, only when our *majalis* and *manabir* become the seats of the duty of *al-amr bil ma`ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar*, only when the Qur'an is made again the book of our life and the light of our *majalis*, only then can it be said that our *majalis* and *manabir* are doing justice to al-Imam al-Husayn (A) and to the people whom the *majalis* were originally instituted to nourish spiritually, morally, and intellectually.

Tehran
Muharram, 1405

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