

# THE MESSAGE OF 'ASHURA

## ~ PEACE ~

As a little girl, I remember the preparation that was done for the 10 days leading up to 'Ashura. My father used to ensure that the mosque was clean, the black banners put up.... He used to practise the eulogies and his business was a forgotten entity for weeks.... Our old clothes were dyed black..... Why? I asked him one day – “all this just for being sad” “It's about being free; about being at peace; about being owned by no-one, being the best – that which God ordained you to be.” He said.



It took me many years to understand that in consciously attaching oneself to God in all that is tangible and intangible one liberates oneself from all bondage to human beings and things – Means to achieve this power granted as freewill – the freedom of choice between stimulus and response wherein lies one's growth and thus character, biography, prisons and if we choose peace through freedom.

As Shias we believe that the event of 'Ashura is the greatest suffering and redemptive act in history.

What happened in the year 680 AD on the battlefield of Karbala is as if it were taking place now, in the present in any place that the Shia live.

The timeless quality of 'Ashura allows us to measure ourselves against the principles and paradigms of Husayn which fight against injustice, tyranny and oppression.

To achieve this peace or freedom 'Ashura teaches me that within this freedom there are 2 major principles:

**The first principle** is based on an internal awareness of truth – its recognition, declaration and standing for it even when faced with death. The essence of this truth being “Live to die not die to live”: It is based on the conviction of a life after death, in other words the knowledge of our origin and destiny. The Qur’an sums it up in a phrase: ‘Indeed we are from God and to Him we return’ 2:156

In essence, it is the cornerstone of freedom. This principle is not exclusive to Islam. In the Bible in Luke 17:33 we read ‘Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will preserve it.’

We find the disciples of Jesus who declared the truth and stood by it despite persecution. Mathew was killed by a sword in Ethiopia, Mark was dragged by horses through the streets of Alexandria until he died, Luke was hanged in Greece, Peter was crucified, John nearly faced being boiled in a basin of boiling oil in Rome. Mathias who replaced Judas was stoned and beheaded...

During the reign of Mary Tudor, more than 300 Protestants were burned at the stake, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which recorded their fate, passed through innumerable editions and served as an inspiration to Protestants. It left out no details of their suffering - such as the long agonies of the Bishop of London, whose legs were slowly burned off on a pyre before he was able to move the rest of his body into the blaze to die.

In 1970, Pope Paul VI canonised 40 English and Welsh Roman Catholics who died for their faith between 1535 and 1679. In some cases, such as that of John Rigby, executed in Southwark in 1600 for refusing to attend Protestant services, their bodies were not burned, but chopped up and scattered around the streets so that they could not be rejoined at the Last Judgment. We find in Greek history in the person of Socrates when he was charged with disbelief in the Athenian gods and corruption of the youth – he says “Let us start a discussion, I know the wisdom of life”. When drinking the hemlock surrounded by his weeping students – besides telling them of the intactness of his being despite the slow death of his body he tells them that this declaration of truth will enable others to have the freedom to gain wisdom.

The second principle is to link the spiritual and intellectual freedom of the first principle to a social dynamic known in Islam as jihad – Jihad is struggle in the cause of truth – in the Qur’an jihad or struggle to establish freedom of truth is linked directly with the struggle in the cause of the oppressed.

In Suratun Nisa 4:75, God says: “And what reason have you that you should not struggle/strive in the way of God and of the weak amongst men, women and children who say: Our Lord! Cause us to go forth from this town whose people are oppressors and give us from you a guardian and a helper.” In the Bible in Hebrews 13:3 we read “Remember those who are in prison as though you are in prison with them; and those who are ill treated, since you also are in the body”

When Imam Husayn (pbuh) saw that the freedom brought by the Prophet of allegiance and submission only to God was being eroded by the prison of allegiance to the government or state over and above the laws of God, he became a freedom fighter – a martyr – one who recognises and declares the truth of freedom and stands by it – freeing the oppressed by being an example, a paradigm, worthy of being followed.

There is one major proviso here that Imam Husayn (pbuh) made very clear – to follow this example we must be able to differentiate the laws of Creator from the created – the Robin Hood principle does not work – the rules for Jihad – the struggle to establish freedom must follow divine laws – there is only One God – the position is not vacant – we cannot be judge, jury and executioners-

We have a famous slogan – “*Every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala*”. Today when we are witness to atrocities in the name of peace, and religion where people are killed, humiliated, oppressed, deprived of their homes we have to declare the truth. We do not believe in pre-destination in that this was meant to be. We do not believe that the martyrs will seek intercession for us and thus absolve us of our responsibilities as human beings

Ashura teaches me that as a mother I am not even HUMAN if I remain silent when I watch another mother standing over the ruins of what was her home looking at the bodies of her children wondering whether there are no free human beings in the world – are we all enslaved?

I believe that I, you, all of us are accountable and that freedom of truth transcends all colour, creed, cultures and that to bring peace to ourselves we have to oppose those who play God speaking out against their tyranny; and if for a moment we think that our little one voice will not make a difference we only have to look at history’

The mighty armies of Rome have gone yet Jesus lives. The armies of the Quraysh have long disappeared yet the words of Muhammad march on the armies of Yazid are long forgotten but the saviour of the freedom of truth – one lone man in the deserts of Iraq still lives and inspires freedom of truth.....