

## **The power of goodness and compassion**

*Which is the greater act of charity: to give away the surplus that you don't really need or to share something that we really need for ourselves? There are different ways of changing the hearts of bad people. One way is to expose them to pure goodness and allow it to have its effect. Do we not have the saying, 'A spoonful of honey attracts more flies than a barrelful of vinegar'? Shakespeare tells us, 'The quality of mercy is not strained'; mercy must be freely given, it cannot be forced. Can human beings be as merciful as God? When is the right time to tell people 'home truths' even though they are unwelcome? When should we keep quiet? What must it be like to receive orders that demand that you do something that you know is not right? How does it grind away within one's heart?*

*For many hundreds of years sayings attributed to Jesus have circulated amongst Muslims in the Arabic language. Jesus is acknowledged as a prophet in the Qur'an; therefore, it is no wonder that Muslims have always sought wisdom from him. One of these sayings speaks of Jesus walking through the market square when people were abusing him. He always responds to their abuse with a blessing. His disciples become annoyed and ask why he doesn't rebuke those who abuse him. Jesus answers, 'Out of a pure heart only pure words and actions can flow.'*

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Once Ibn Ziyad had a firm grip on power in Kufa, he sent out an army of men from that city to intercept and shadow Hussain and his companions on their journey. Their leader was a man called Hurr. He was an established and well-regarded army commander from Kufa, noted for his bravery. Hurr was a man of firm belief and piety but not someone involved in politics. He had been recommended to Ibn Ziyad as someone who would execute his orders. Hurr's men met up with the party of Hussain about 70 miles (110 kms) from Kufa. They were hot, dusty, sweating and fatigued from their journey. They entered the camp of Hussain some time before the midday (*zuhr*) prayer. Hussain knew that things were turning against him in Kufa and so was uncertain of the intention of these new arrivals. He asked them if they had come to join him or to fight against him. At this, Hurr replied that they had not come as friends.

Hussain's reaction to this news was to greet them with words of peace and then order his men to give water to the men from Kufa so that they could drink and wash. Likewise, he said that the horses and camels should be given water to drink and sprayed with water to refresh them. Water is the most precious commodity in the desert. This was water that Hussain's men had drawn the previous day for their own needs on the journey. This was not the welcome that Hurr and his men expected!

The newcomers had a chance to rest before the time for the midday prayer. When the call to prayer was finished, Hussain approached Hurr to invite him and his men to join in the congregational prayer or, if they wished, to pray separately. Hurr responded that he and his men would 'perform the prayer together with you in one line.' In this way

both groups formed one congregation for prayer with Hussain acting as the prayer leader. By doing this Hurr and his men had recognised a certain spiritual authority in Hussain.

After the prayer, Hussain addressed the men who had come from Kufa with Hurr. He explained to them that he had been invited by many letters from the people of Kufa and that he was responding to those invitations. Now these men assembled had to decide if they were going to honour those invitations and pledge allegiance to him. It was not his plan to force himself on the people of Kufa. It is reported that Hurr and his men made no response to this speech.

The time came for the afternoon (*asr*) prayer and again the men from Kufa joined the companions of Hussain and prayed behind him as leader. After the prayer, Hussain again addressed Hurr and his army. He made it plain to them that, if they were pious and knowledgeable Muslims, then they would recognise that Hussain, the son of the daughter of Muhammad, had the God-given right to lead the Muslim community. Those who had been failing to live by the teachings of Islam and increasing division and hatred within what should be a united community, by which he meant Yazid and the Umayyads, had no claim to leadership. These men of Kufa had to decide if they were going to be true to their letters of invitation and follow him, or to accept the authority of Yazid and Ibn Ziyad.

Hurr responded by saying that he had never heard about any such letters of invitation. At this Hussain ordered that the letters should be produced. Two bags were brought out, packed with letters from the leaders of Kufa. These were emptied in front of Hurr, who again protested that he had no knowledge of them.

Hussain and Hurr now entered into conversation. Hurr made clear that his mission from Ibn Ziyad was to bring Hussain to him, to stop him turning away in another direction or from returning the way that he had come. Ibn Ziyad's fear was that Hussain would slip through his fingers. Hussain repeated that he was responding to letters of invitation from the people of Kufa. If they had now decided to switch allegiance and desert him, then he was prepared to turn back. To this Hurr replied that he could not allow him to do so; his orders were to bring him to Ibn Ziyad. Hussain replied that no matter how Hurr tried, he would find it almost impossible to bring him to Ibn Ziyad.

When Hussain ordered his party to move off and turn back, Hurr and his men prevented them and some skirmishes took place. The women in Hussain's party were naturally terrified. Hussain addressed Hurr: 'May your mother mourn you! Why are you preventing us from going back?' Hurr had great respect for the Prophet and his family. He replied: 'By God! If any man amongst the Arabs had mentioned my mother, then I would have done the same! But I cannot do so to you since your mother was Fatima.'

Seeing Hussain's resolve and being reluctant to fight him, Hurr suggested a compromise. His original orders required him to bring Hussain to Ibn Ziyad in Kufa, but they did not include fighting him. He suggested that they should journey together

away from Medina but take a route that deviated from the straight road to Kufa. During this time Hurr said that he would send a letter to Ibn Ziyad requesting new orders. He concluded, 'I hope that I am saved from a confrontation with you. I remind you, that if you resort to the sword and start a battle, you will certainly be slain.'

Hussain replied, 'Do you frighten me with death? Can you do anything other than kill me?' He then quoted the speech of a man who was leaving his family to go to the help of Prophet Muhammad.

I shall rush towards death, which is not a disgrace for a youth when his intention is right and he fights as a Muslim, when he wishes to support those who do good by sacrificing his life, by disagreeing with the criminals and those who are the enemies of God. I am offering my life and do not wish to retain it, so as to confront a magnificent army in a fierce battle. If I live, I won't regret it; and if I die, I shall not be blamed, while for you, it is enough to live in disgrace.

In the days to come, while Hurr and his men shadowed the party of Hussain in their journey, the words and actions of Hussain had a strong impact in the heart of Hurr. To understand this, we need to jump ahead a little in our story. In Karbala, on the day of the massacre itself, Hurr was lined up with the Umayyad army ready to attack and kill Hussain and his companions. Suddenly, he broke ranks, and rode his horse to stop beside Hussain. He begged his mercy and forgiveness for the part that he had played in leading him to this place of his death. He asked if he might be allowed to join the company of Hussain and to die with him in the cause of right. Hussain forgave him totally and accepted him into his company, so that he could die alongside his companions and thus attain the highest dignity of being a martyr.

We are told that God gave two sayings (*hadith qudsi*) to Muhammad to be proclaimed amongst the people as an indication of the nature of mercy and forgiveness with God. In the first, God said, 'I have taken upon myself the law of mercy; my mercy will overcome my wrath.' In the second, God said, 'If my servant comes to me with sins as high as a mountain but with repentance in his heart seeking forgiveness, he will find it.' The meaning here is that God's mercy has no limits for those who repent and seek to reform their lives. The forgiveness of God does not leave one crippled; rather one is reinstated to the full dignity of a servant of God and thus capable of performing the highest deeds of goodness. The only limiting factor is what is in the heart of the believer. Shi'a Muslims reinforce this understanding by saying that the justice of God demands that God should reward people as God has promised; however, the mercy of God can overwhelm God's justice and God may choose not to punish people according to the just punishment for their sins. As a pure and sinless servant of God, Hussain here sets an example of the quality of mercy which one hopes for from God, and therefore, to which one should strive in human affairs.