

'It is my destiny'

Think of someone who's just had their first baby; could you ever explain fully just what lies ahead? It's one thing to be filled with excitement going for the first time to an unknown land to help to relieve the people's suffering after a disaster; it's quite another to go subsequent times when you know what lies ahead! Do we have any real freedom in life? Is life all destined, all written for us, we just have to play it out? What does it mean to walk into a future that we have freely chosen but we know will end in our death and the death of those whom we love? Which is the true leader: someone who endures the hardship with the rest of the people, or someone who is sheltered in a palace?

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Once Hurr and his men had made contact with the party of Hussain, they did not leave them. The two groups moved on a parallel path so that Hussain was constantly under the watchful eye of the agents of Yazid. Their path diverted from the direction of Kufa and they went further into the desert. Hurr and his party were all seasoned men who could be expected to endure the hardships of a desert journey. In the company of Hussain, in addition to the men, there were also women and children. All had to endure the privations of life in the desert: sparing every drop of water, sleeping in tents, preparing food on open fires, caring for the children and the constant trudging of their camels and horses ever onwards. Hussain shared their lot in every way, but with an acute sensitivity that stemmed from a deeper grasp of what lay ahead.

A model for the present situation can be seen in the action of the Prophet Muhammad when he was willing to commit to mutual cursing, the *mubahala*, as we have already seen in the first chapter. On that occasion he was prepared to take the field with his entire family, the Ahl al-Bayt. Not just his own life was at stake, but also the lives of the future generations of his family, those called to be the divinely-appointed leaders of the Muslim community. Death awaited those who were proved liars by God. Following this model, Hussain has in his company his three sons and two daughters; the entire next generation of his family. Everything that he has is placed at the disposal of God in total trust. The life of faith is not a matter merely of reciting words; it demands that those words are backed up with actions. This total commitment by Hussain should not be seen as a disregard for the lives of his children. We might reflect upon the actions of his father, Ali. It is reported that, at the Battle of Siffin, Ali was concerned about the whereabouts of his two sons, Hasan and Hussain. They represented the line of blood descent from Muhammad and so he was concerned that their lives and that blood line should not be cut off. However, he trusted in God for their preservation in the battle.

To grasp what is happening here, we need to reflect on the meaning of victory for Hussain. We have seen the way in which he has sought to avoid bloodshed on many occasions. We have heard him say that he is not seeking a military confrontation with the people of Kufa. We have noted him saying that whether he lives or whether he dies is not the ultimately important question for him. Since before he left Medina, when he

went to bid farewell to his grandfather Muhammad, he has known that he was called to martyrdom. He was told too that his wife and children would either be slain or taken captive. Victory for Hussain is not equated with winning a military battle. Victory is not even preserving his own life; he knows that that will not happen. Victory means, quite simply, total obedience to whatever it is that God wills. Victory means a complete submission of his will to the will of God. Whatever the apparent price that must be paid is only relevant from the perspective of this world. God is the giver of his life and that of his children; it is for God to decide when and how each life should end. With the benefit of fourteen centuries' hindsight, we can see that the act of total submission, which led to his martyrdom and that of his family and companions at Karbala, was a complete vindication of his stand against injustice and tyranny; a comprehensive victory. It was as though Hussain had a glimpse of the timeless significance of what he was called to do.

Hussain has said that martyrdom is his destiny. Destiny is sometimes spoken of as though it were all written like the script of a play. The actor has no choice about the actions which the character in the play performs. That is a kind of dehumanising view of destiny. One of the unique gifts that God has given to human beings, as Muslims understand it, is the gift of freewill. We are not puppets on strings with God controlling us. Destiny for Hussain is to discern what it is that God wills and then freely to accept it. God is good and only wills what is good; there is no evil in God. Complete surrender to the divine will must necessarily mean that the outcome will be good. It may not appear that way from a human perspective. The tragedy of Karbala remains a tragedy, a massacre, the wilful destruction of innocent human lives. There is no way of escaping the agony through which Hussain, his family, and his companions are going to pass. If we can try to see things from the perspective of God for a moment, as far as we can, then the outcome of this tragedy will be to lay down a marker, a role model for all subsequent peoples; an example of human living in total submission to the will of God.

We can gauge the importance of the mission on which Hussain is embarked from a speech that he made to the men of Kufa who accompanied his party. He quoted a tradition reported from Prophet Muhammad: 'Anybody who sees a tyrant ruler who treats the things that God has prohibited as though they were permitted...And does not revolt against him in words or deeds, God has every right to drive him to the same place as the tyrant [i.e., hell].' Hussain added, 'Be aware that the Umayyads have preferred obeying Satan and have abandoned obeying the all-merciful God. They have supported corruption, failed to implement divine justice and have declared permissible things that have been declared unlawful and forbidden.' Hussain then went on to declare that he was the divinely-appointed head of the community and that they were duty bound to follow him as the letters from Kufa had promised. He called upon them to honour their invitation to him. He reminded them that they had already neglected the allegiance due to Ali and Hasan, and had broken faith with Muslim ibn Aqil. 'Anyone who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment.' He thus made it clear that the whole reason for the stand that he was taking was to preserve the purity of the message which had been given through the Qur'an. 'I intend to command what is good and prohibit what is evil and to return to the conduct of my grandfather, Prophet Muhammad.' As the leader of

the Muslim community he had no other option if he was to remain true to the duty placed upon him.

By undertaking the mission on which he had embarked he was following the example of his father, Ali, who is reported to have said at the Battle of Siffin, which he fought against the forces of Mu'awiya, the father of the current Umayyad ruler, Yazid: 'I also pondered about this war a lot and spent several nights reflecting on it. I found myself at the crossroads of the battle between war and blasphemy, and preferred the war to blasphemy. This is because God will never be satisfied with his servants when a sin is committed on earth and they are silent and remain content with the prevailing situation, and stop encouraging people to do the good and lawful, and forbidding others from committing the forbidden. Hence, I have found battling these people easier than enduring the chains of hell.'

As they continued their journey, some men from Kufa came out to meet with Hussain. They explained that the clan chiefs in Kufa had received bribes and threats from Ibn Ziyad. They told him that a huge army was assembling in order to fight against him. They said that not even one person in Kufa could be relied upon to come to their aid. Already enough men were assembled to defeat Hussain and his companions and yet their number and weapons were constantly increasing. Ibn Ziyad had ordered that every able-bodied man in Kufa must, under pain of death, enlist in his army to take the field against Hussain. The visitors from Kufa pleaded with him to turn aside into the high mountains where he would be safe; there they could draw together other men who would fight alongside him. Hussain thanked them for their concern but said that he would rather continue on his journey. He knew that Yazid would seek him out wherever he went and that he could put a powerful army into the field; the same army that had conquered Egypt, Syria and Persia. The larger the number of men who gathered to Hussain's side, the greater would be the loss of human life. This was not Hussain's intention. He wanted to send a message to all future generations. The dramatic effect of the tragedy that was about to unfold would be heard like a clarion call to touch the hearts of all human beings.

Further on their journey Hussain and his party encountered a man who had fought against Ali at the Battle of Siffin and had a bad reputation for his many criminal acts. Hussain rode into his camp and had a conversation with him. He invited him to repent of his many sins and express that repentance by joining with Hussain in the coming battle. The man explained that he was certain that Hussain and his companions would be killed and that he was very much afraid of death so he would not join with him. He even offered Hussain his horse, which had carried him to victory against all his enemies, so that, if the worst happened, he also could flee from his enemy. Such thoughts of flight were far from the thinking of Hussain! Hussain told him that he had no need of assistance from those who refuse to sacrifice their life for the cause of right. He advised him to go far away from the place where the battle would take place so that he would not hear the cries for help. 'By God! Nobody hears our cries for help and does not come to help us but God will throw them into the fire of hell.' By going to the camp of a known sinner, to invite him to repentance and to atone for his many sins, Hussain was

reflecting that willingness of God to grant forgiveness to even the greatest sinner if they should repent and seek that forgiveness.