

## **What is it 'to remember'?**

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, this means that each month is timed around the cycles of the moon; a new moon means a new month. A lunar month is technically twenty-nine-and-a-half days long, but in practice it is either twenty-nine or thirty days long. At the end of the twenty-ninth day one goes out to try to sight the crescent moon; if it can be sighted, then tomorrow is the first day of the new month, and if it cannot be sighted, then tomorrow will be the thirtieth day of this month and the next day will automatically be the first of the new month. There are twelve lunar months in a year, which means that each lunar year is 354 days long; that makes it eleven days shorter than a solar year. Everything timed according to this lunar calendar appears to occur about eleven days earlier every year, when timed according to the solar calendar. The events of Karbala took place in the opening days of the first month of the year according to the Islamic calendar. The first ten days of this month, called Muharram, every year are marked by the remembrance of the events that we have been exploring, culminating on the tenth of that month, the day of the massacre itself, the Day of Ashura.

Why do people need to remember those events every year? If it were merely a question of learning the history and understanding the personalities involved, then once we had done that, there would be no need to do it again. If it were merely a case of being aware of the geography of Karbala, then once people had visited once and seen the shrines and paid their respects to the martyrs buried there, then there would be no reason to go again. To remember the events associated with the martyrdom of Hussain and his companions is much more than a question of history, stories, or geography. So why do Shi'a Muslims place so much emphasis on these ten days, meeting every night to hear again the events leading up to the massacre and indeed, with great sorrow and emotion, reliving that memory?

We could ask why do we remember and celebrate any event every year? Whether it be a wedding anniversary, a birthday or perhaps the anniversary of the death of a member of our family. Especially when we think of someone who has died, we might say that we remember them at this time to keep their memory alive; so that we do not forget the important part that they played in our lives. We might say that they live on in our memory. This is common to all our human experience, but when we move into a religious way of thinking, there is another important step to be made. To grasp what is happening here in a religious context we need to explore more fully the concept of remembering.

From a human perspective, we might count back to the year in which the events took place. We can say that the massacre of Karbala took place on the tenth of Muharram 680CE. That is to locate it in a human dimension. To understand the importance of a great religious event like the Day of Ashura we need to try to move out of our human, restricted dimension, to see things from God's perspective. This is really difficult because we are creatures, we were born at a certain time, in a certain place; we live, and then we will die at a certain time and a certain place. We humans are limited by time

and space. I am alive today not a thousand years ago. I live in this country not on the other side of the world. This is not how things look from God's perspective.

When Muslims speak about God, they say that God is eternal; that means that God is not limited by time at all. God never had a beginning and God never will have an end. God is not old or young; such concepts of time mean nothing from God's perspective. From our human perspective, we have a past tense to speak about history and a future tense to speak about what is yet to come. From God's perspective, there is no time, therefore it is meaningless to speak about the past or the future because everything is present to God 'now'. We call this the 'eternal present' of God.

We humans are physical beings, we have a body and therefore we are fixed in space. I am here and not there. When Muslims speak of God, God has no physical body. Therefore, God is not limited by space. To speak of God in space is meaningless; God is both everywhere and nowhere in our human terms. This means that any event in our creation, wherever it takes place in the universe, is immediately present to God.

If we apply God's perspective to the events of Karbala, then we can say that those events are happening now, at this moment, because there is no time with God. Similarly, we can say that Karbala is not a physical place located in Iraq, but from God's perspective, Karbala is right here and everywhere. This is not an easy concept for us to grasp because we are so used to working in time and space. Indeed, we have another problem; when we try to talk about these things or to explain them, we have to use human language and human concepts, and are bound by the limits of our human perspective. We can only do the best that we can. Our human language and concepts do not penetrate through into God's perspective but they are all that we have to try to talk about such things. You might well have heard the expression *Allahu akbar* used in Muslim circles. It is often translated 'God is the greatest', that is, as a superlative. We might remember a famous heavyweight boxer who used to say often 'I am the greatest' but that only held true until he was beaten! The expression *Allahu akbar* is not a superlative but a comparative, so it would be better to translate it 'God is greater than...' God is greater than anything we can imagine, than anything we can speak about, whether in poetry or in philosophy, greater than anything that we can tie down with our human concepts. So, whatever we can say about God, or God's perspective, it is only the very best that we can manage and 'God is greater than...any attempt that we can make'.

When Muslims remember a great event like the massacre of Karbala, they are seeking to move out from a human perspective and to attempt to see it in God's perspective. This is to move beyond the limitations of our human history into something beyond that: we can call it meta-history. To remember something in meta-history is to make it present here and now. That's what it means to liberate an event from time and space, to lift it from our human perspective and history into God's perspective or God's meta-history. This is the meaning of a phrase that is often used in this context, 'Every day is Ashura and every place is Karbala'.

This has a profound impact on Shi'a Muslims when they remember the events of Karbala. It is lifted out of time and place and made present wherever they are in the world when this time of year comes round. But more than that, because it is lifted into meta-history, the lessons, the example, and the devotion are made present at every moment of every day and in every place and context of daily life. Those examples of total faith, trust, and submission to the will of God that have been dominant themes during our study must be allowed to shape and colour the life and context of every Shi'a Muslim in all times and places. The demand not to submit to tyranny and injustice, to resist them with all one's might, and indeed with one's life, wherever they are encountered, at work, in society, within families or communities, in public and in private life, must become part of the natural disposition for those who follow the example of Hussain and his companions.

By remembering, by making present, the events of Karbala, we can see that these ten days are a time of profound spiritual reflection and renewal in the lives of Shi'a Muslims. The temptations to tyranny and injustice, in small things as well as great, are present in the lives of all human beings in every age and society. So, part of the spiritual discipline during these days of Muharram is to examine and root out those negative elements that have crept into each one's life. We could think of this as identifying elements in our lower human nature that need to be corrected and elevating ourselves to be more like Hussain. By making present once again the exemplary character, not just of Hussain, but also of the companions who embraced death alongside him rather than give in to tyranny, and also the women and children who survived and carried on the message of Hussain after the massacre, an ideal is held up before our eyes of the heights or ideals of which human beings are capable and which can inspire people up until today. The very name Hussain itself means 'one of beautiful character', therefore he is the supreme example for Muslims to live by.

To grasp the significance of this example we need to consider the position that Hussain holds in the understanding of Shi'a Muslims. The Qur'an speaks of certain people as being chosen and purified by God to the ultimate degree. These are those who are of the highest spiritual excellence and as close to God as any human being can be in this life. Such people are extremely rare in human history and the Qur'an mentions Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad as examples. For Shi'a Muslims Hussain stands in the same company. For such exalted people there is no scope for any base motives in their lives: no selfishness, arrogance or egoism. Their lives are so aligned with the divine that the will of God becomes their will and the word of God becomes their word. When we see Hussain in this light, then we can understand why Shi'a Muslims, as well as many Sunnis, will want to remember his pain, suffering and sacrifice, to be moved to tears by that remembrance, and thus, by loving those who were loved by God, to draw closer to God themselves. By doing so they show their willingness to take on for themselves that perpetual battle for justice, goodness and truth. It is as though their love for Hussain, expressed through their tears of sorrow, will cleanse their hearts and ennoble their characters so that they might be worthy followers of Hussain in this life and companions of his in the life of Paradise.

It is important to reflect again on the meaning of victory in this story. Victory in business might mean a bigger profit or an expansion of the firm. Victory in charitable giving might mean relieving suffering or improving the lot of those in need. How can a story in which the hero and his companions end up being brutally massacred and the women and children taken off as captives represent a victory? In a human perspective, that does not make sense, but in God's perspective, victory is not winning or losing a battle but rather striving for the heights of spiritual excellence, which means that one is prepared to submit oneself totally to the divine will 'come what may'. The victory of Hussain was not about defeating an enemy in battle but rather defeating tyranny that cloaked itself in the guise of religion. It was about defeating the misuse of authority and egoism in the name of God. This is the victory of goodness and truth, because God is the Good and the True. Therefore, removing all that is bad and false in one's life is the highest imitation of the example of Hussain and the greatest striving for closeness to God. This is the victory for which Hussain strove and which he won.

Great religious figures do not belong to the particular community in which they lived and who are charged with keeping their memory alive. Great religious figures belong to God and, as Muslims understand it, God has no favourites; God is not the property of any particular people or religion. Throughout human history God has been guiding humankind on the right path. Therefore, the life and example of a great religious figure like Hussain are not confined to any one faith community. Hussain's influence and inspiration have touched the lives of many people who do not belong to the Muslim community. These are great human virtues that can inspire goodness, uprightness, justice and perseverance for everyone. A relatively small group of people in an obscure desert plain can light a beacon to summon people to promote what is good in every society and to oppose those things that are unjust in every society. Their example is one of the victory of goodness and truth in the face of overwhelming odds. That example can inspire human beings today and people as yet unborn can benefit from our right actions just as we can benefit from the example of Karbala.