

## **What would the world look like if guided by the virtues of justice, equity and peace? A reflection on the Arbaeen Walk**

In August 2024 I was invited to be part of the commemoration of Arbaeen in Karbala, Iraq. This was the site of the battle that took place in 680CE, which resulted in the massacre of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and seventy-two members of his family and companions.<sup>1</sup> Arbaeen means ‘forty’, so this is the climax of the mourning period of forty days after the date of the battle. The practice of visiting the graves of the martyrs dates back to the aftermath of the battle itself when Lady Zaynab (Husayn’s sister), Imam Zayn al-Abidin (Husayn’s only son to survive the battle), and the other women and children, who had been taken into captivity and brought to Damascus, made such a visitation on their way under military escort back to Madina.

The practice of making a visitation to the shrine built over the grave of Imam Husayn was recommended by the divinely-appointed Shi'a Imams. It is seen to be a mark of love and respect for Imam Husayn and the other martyrs, and a source of blessing from God. At times the rulers of the day have forbidden such a visitation, for example, during the time of Saddam Hussein. After his overthrow in 2003, the practice of gathering in substantial numbers for Arbaeen has been revived with renewed vigour, so much so that in recent years the number of pilgrims has been in the region of twenty-plus million people.

It is customary for pilgrims to make their way to Karbala on foot. Many walk long distances from other parts of Iraq, e.g., from Basra around five hundred kilometres away, and indeed sometimes even from places in Iran, when the distance would exceed one thousand kilometres. In general, pilgrims walk from the shrine of Imam Ali, the father of Husayn, in Najaf, which is a distance of eighty kilometres. In August temperatures on this journey are in the region of forty-five degrees Celsius by day and around thirty degrees at night. The temperature and distance make this a strenuous exercise. Quite remarkably, pilgrims are of all ages from children in pushchairs to the elderly walking with the aid of a stick. Men and women walk side by side and infirmity is no barrier, with some pilgrims being on crutches or in wheelchairs. Most of the pilgrims are Muslims, both Shi'a and Sunni, but sometimes Christians, Jews, Hindus and people of no faith, who are attracted to the values of Husayn, take part.

Throughout the centuries, pilgrims have undertaken their journeys on foot; this was also true of the hajj to Makka. The act of walking such a distance has a significance of its own. One has time to reflect on one’s own life; to enter a deeper state of contemplation and thus it is an opportunity for real spiritual growth. Walking in the heat requires physical discipline and mental strength; it can be something of a sacrifice and thus unites the pilgrims with the martyrs whose shrines they are about to visit. Such a pilgrimage is not a solitary exercise; the pilgrims gain a sense of community and common cause. They also learn from one another on the way. In our own times, when

---

<sup>1</sup> To read the lead up to the battle of Karbala and the fate of the survivors afterwards, see my *Husayn and the Struggle for Justice* on this website (Written Resources, Books)

we are conscious of our impact on the environment, walking is much less detrimental than any form of motorised transport.

The whole distance from Najaf to Karbala is punctuated by wayside stations to supply the bodily needs of pilgrims: food, water, and places to rest. These stations are organised and staffed by volunteers from Iraq and from many other countries. There are specialist stations where running repairs can be made to wheelchairs, pushchairs or footwear. Medical teams come to deal with first aid, the effects of heat exposure and any other medical condition that might become evident during the walk, whilst foot massages and physiotherapy are also offered. The Iraqi government makes electricity available free of charge to the stations, but that is their sole contribution. Poor Iraqis will save during the year to be able to offer food freely to the pilgrims. Richer supporters might pay for a consignment of water to be purchased to give away to people as they pass. Under such conditions, huge quantities of water are essential and hundreds of millions of small plastic tubs of purified water, sealed with a plastic foil, are handed out almost at every step. In addition, tea, coffee, drinking yoghurt and juices are prepared in abundance.

The seemingly endless tide of pilgrims have one goal; to reach Karbala and pay their respects to Imam Husayn on the fortieth day. Karbala city has a resident population of around two million people and they open their arms to welcome ten times that number by the climax of the walk. The crowds in and around the shrines by the time of Arbaeen are truly staggering in size. They are marshalled by volunteer stewards, who attempt to direct them with wands resembling feather dusters. Day and night, there is a mass of people trying to draw close to the silver grille that surrounds the tomb of Husayn himself. They will seek to touch the grille if they can and to find a place outside of the flow of people to offer their prayers to God. In Muslim understanding, those of the highest spiritual excellence, such as the Prophets and Imams, are aware of the presence of those who come to their final resting places and are alert to hear their requests, with the plea that they might be presented before God. In this way, they act as two-way conduits to add their prayers to those of the pilgrims and to be a vehicle through which the blessings of God may flow.

The hearts of the pilgrims are filled with the love of Imam Husayn. To make such a visitation is an act of devotion. The Imam is not worshiped; worship belongs to God alone, but the love of Husayn naturally leads to the love of God, whose Friend the Imam is, and then to the love of humanity and all God's creation. Such devotion invokes the remembrance of the horrific details of the massacre of Karbala and so the pilgrims are moved to tears and a sense of anguish at what happened there. This can be expressed by some pilgrims striking their chests or heads in deep sorrow that the small company of Imam Husayn was deserted and left without support in their hour of need. The pilgrims not only look backwards to the events of 680, but also renew their pledge to God to be worthy of the martyrs' sacrifice and to live in the future inspired by the values for which they lived and died. There is truly a sense of 'if only I had been there, I would have stood firm alongside the Imam and been a true supporter even to the point of dying alongside him.'

## Seeking the deeper meaning

If we ask the men, women and children who come to Karbala at Arbaeen what inspires them to make this arduous walk, the answer on every lip will be ‘for the love of Husayn.’ But in discussion with the scholars, a deeper meaning emerges, which gives the walk and visitation an awesome, cosmic meaning. To understand this, we have to go back several steps in Muslim self-understanding.

First, God is the creator of all humankind and has sent guidance in the forms of scriptures and prophets to all the peoples of the earth at some stage in their history. The first prophet was Adam, the first man, and the last was Muhammad, but in between these two came a vast number; in one report Muhammad speaks of 124,000 prophets being sent to the earth. God is in essence just and it would be a lack of justice to guide one group of people in one way and another in a fundamentally different way. This establishes the principle that all scriptures and prophets conveyed essentially the same message. This message was to guide human beings to live in justice, equity and peace in this life, so that all may flourish and come to paradise after death. This is summed up by the term *din al-fitra*, which we can translate as ‘the natural way of human living.’ So, the religion of God, ‘the natural way of human living’, is the timeless *islam*, which was revealed from the time of Prophet Adam until its final, definitive revelation in the Qur'an sent down to the Prophet Muhammad. In this way, we can understand that Muslims see Islam, not as the religion of a particular group, but as the God-given way of life that leads to human flourishing and the final goal of paradise. Given this consistency through all ages and peoples, then the human being who encounters the essential message of Islam with an open heart, ought to recognise it as what it is and be able to say ‘that makes sense’. We can see then that the values that lay at the core of the life of Imam Husayn are open to be appreciated by all human beings, hence the number of those of other faiths and no-faith who are attracted to join the Arbaeen Walk.

Second, all great religious leaders do not belong to just one group of people but rather they belong to God, and thus to all humankind. We can see this in the way in which Muslims have handed down reports of sayings and actions of Jesus and other earlier prophets. If we apply this to Imam Husayn, then his life and actions are a role model for all human beings and everyone has the right to access them and learn how to live ‘the natural way of human living’ from them. It follows too that those who possess this knowledge, predominantly Shi'a scholars and people, have the duty to make it available to all who have the right to it.

Third, the Qur'an conveys the guidance and principles of how to live ‘the natural way of human living’ but they are put into practice by Prophet Muhammad. He it is, in practical terms, who lays down ‘the straight path’ that leads to human flourishing and paradise. In Shi'a understanding, this guidance does not end with the death of Muhammad but he informed the Muslim community that “I leave after me two most precious things: the Qur'an and my family (the *Ahl al-Bayt*, from which all the Imams come), never shall they separate until they reach me at the threshold of paradise.” One

of those Imams was Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, who was inspired to live a life that exemplified those fundamental values. In the same way, the line of divinely-appointed Imams were inspired to interpret the Qur'an and apply its guidance during their lifetimes and thus establish and reinforce 'the straight path' through all ages after them.

Fourth, all Muslims look forward to a future age, the last period of life on earth, in which the Mahdi, the Awaited One, will appear to seek out those who are on 'the straight path' and to bring all humanity back to 'the natural way of human living that leads to human flourishing and the goal of paradise.' For Sunni Muslims, the identity of the Mahdi is unknown, but the Shi'a understand him to be Imam al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam, who will reappear after having lived a hidden life since 941. This belief in the coming of the Mahdi provides the impetus to the pilgrims at Arbaeen to rededicate their lives to follow 'the straight path'. It also means that by living that 'natural way', all on the straight path act as beacons to draw others to its guidance and thus to prepare the way and hopefully hasten the appearance of the Mahdi.

### **What values promote human flourishing and how are they exemplified in the life of Imam Husayn?**

The dominant value that stands out from the story of Husayn is his stand for justice and his refusal to give in to tyranny, even at the cost of his own life and those of his family and companions. It would theoretically have been possible for him to pledge allegiance to someone that he knew to be unworthy of leadership but the consequence would have been that those around him would have felt empowered to do the same and that would set a precedent for ages yet to come. Too often we limit justice to major events or to seeking retribution from those who have wronged us, but the concept of justice is far wider than this. We can begin with the definition of the Greek philosopher Plato, who said that justice means 'everything in its rightful place.' We can see then that justice is a universal value open to reason and thus applicable to all people. Religious people would relate this definition to God by saying that justice is everything in the correct relationship to God and to everything else according to the guidance of God as made clear by the scriptures and prophets. In this sense, when everything is correctly ordered, justice brings about harmony and peace within all creation, not just between people but also between us and the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms; they are not to be exploited or wantonly destroyed.

A fundamental requirement for justice is equity between all peoples. There can be no room for distinctions based on race, social status, education, gender or wealth. In the final journey of Imam Husayn, we see that all his party: men, women and children, endured equally the hardships of the desert. Those who accompanied him as servants were given their freedom before he would allow them to take the field of battle; only a free person can make the decision to accept the call to martyrdom. One such former servant was recorded to have been of darker skin. In his dying moments, Husayn went to comfort him and laid his cheek alongside his, thus signifying that skin colour did not separate them. Seventeen of those who died in the battle were blood relations of

Husayn, including two of his own sons, yet kinship did not give them greater honour in dying for what was right; all the martyrs were eventually buried alongside their Imam in the precincts of the shrine in Karbala.

We have seen the intrinsic relationship between justice and peace. Peace is not merely the absence of fighting, a negotiated ceasefire or an agreement to allow an unjust situation to continue in order to avoid further bloodshed. Abiding peace can only come about when everything is in the correct relationship to everything else, or to put it another way, when justice reigns. We notice Imam Husayn rejecting all the easy options put to him, which might have saved his life and those of his companions but which would have left the unjust situation to continue and expand. He refused to turn back, to send away his family, to escape and hide in the hills, or to begin the fight when the enemy forces were at their weakest. When there is justice and equity between peoples, then there can be true peace.

At the heart of Islam lies the believer's commitment to submit their will to the will of God, whatever the consequences, knowing that God only wills good. Commitment is one of the key values of 'the natural way of human living'. Before he left Madina to travel to Makka and on to Karbala, we recall that Imam Husayn visited the grave of his grandfather and there had a dream-vision. He was told by Muhammad that his journey would end in his martyrdom and that his family members would either be killed alongside him or be taken captive. With this knowledge in his heart, he nevertheless went on to cross the desert ultimately to see his family members and then himself butchered on the Day of Ashura.

This commitment was shared equally by the women of the company of Husayn on that fateful journey. They too endured the hardships of the desert, which were compounded by the suffering of their children. Their commitment did not waver when they prepared their menfolk to enter the field of battle, received back their mutilated bodies and watched in horror as the massacre unfolded. In like manner, they remained firm gathered around Lady Zaynab as the soldiers ransacked their camp and led them off into captivity. It was Zaynab herself who provided leadership for the survivors and repeatedly proclaimed the truth of what had happened. Her commitment remained steadfast in the court of the tyrant in Damascus, where she 'spoke truth to power', inspired no doubt by the Prophet's saying that 'the greatest *jihad* is to speak the word of truth into the face of the tyrant.'

Finally, we have a profound example of the power of goodness to turn a human heart to seek forgiveness. When Hurr, one of the captains of the opposing army, was sent with a company of soldiers to locate and shadow Imam Husayn on his journey towards Karbala, he and his men, although declared enemies, were welcomed into the Imam's camp with a show of profound goodness, being given water in the heat and dust of the desert for both men and horses. This good act worked in the heart of Hurr ultimately causing him to break ranks with his own forces on the Day of Ashura, ride to the feet of Imam Husayn to seek forgiveness for his part in bringing him to this place of

impending massacre, and, being forgiven, led him to the highest of dignities, to die as a martyr alongside his Imam.

### **The Arbaeen Walk as a living example of these godly values.**

In the light of these values, being both godly and profoundly part of 'the natural way of human living,' let us turn back to the walkers on the road to reach Karbala for the commemoration of Arbaeen. We see in them a commitment to carry on and complete their pilgrimage, no matter how far there may be left to travel. They walk alongside strangers, maybe not even sharing a common language but with a single goal to reach the shrine of Imam Husayn. In spite of the heat and the hardship of the walk, there is a joy in their hearts that is reflected in their whole demeanour; there is no aggression, pushing others out of the way or complaining about waiting to receive food or water.

The conduct of the walk turns much of modern economics on its head. Instead of water being a commodity that should be sold at a profit, we find it here in copious amounts being given away free of charge. Similarly, those who come to offer their services to repair wheelchairs, pushchairs or footwear do so without thought of financial return. Likewise, the various medical personnel pay their own expenses, sometimes travelling from as far away as Europe or Australia, and neither ask nor accept payment for the attention that they give. Most remarkably, the bulk of the food is supplied by ordinary citizens of Iraq, who save during the year to be able to buy, prepare and freely distribute food to the pilgrims. Some stations along the way provide places where people can sleep, sometimes by the thousand, while others sleep in local residents' houses. There are periodic stations between Baghdad and Najaf, but certainly from Najaf onwards, pilgrims exist in a world of gifts from the bounty of God and not one of economic exploitation for profit.

Some of the larger feeding stations are run by charities from other countries where teams of women and men volunteer their time and others gather the charitable offerings to provide the ingredients, equipment and consumables needed. These can be big operations feeding tens of thousands each day. A spirit of peace and common cause permeates those waiting quietly in serried ranks to be fed. Despite heat and fatigue no-one seeks to jump the queue or assert a right to be first. The spirit of Arbaeen does not end after the days of pilgrimage for some of these charitable stations. There are always poor people to be fed and Iraq has many orphans in need of shelter, provisions and education. Their needs are met on the basis of *sadaqa*, 'bearing one another's burdens', throughout the year.

The observer's attention is drawn to the dignity afforded to everyone on the road to Karbala. There is no shortage of people willing to take a turn pushing a wheelchair or pushchair. No-one hassles those making slow progress on crutches or walking with a stick. Women walk in total security and without interference. The poor person offering some dates is accorded due respect. So keen are people to have the honour to feed a pilgrim that they are almost pulled in off the road to partake of whatever is being offered or to refresh themselves with water. Some stations even go to the trouble and expense

of making ice to cool bottles of water to be given away. Pilgrims come in all ages, a range of nationalities and languages, and every social class. In like manner those who service their needs: a senior scholar tells me that he joins his local bus drivers in their feeding station. The need for toilets is not forgotten with due provision for men and women; there is even a guidebook to direct people to a toileting station with equipment to meet their preferences. None of the distinguishing features that divide our societies seem to make any difference during these days: all share a common and equal human dignity.

Could it be that by reflecting on the conduct of people on the Arbaeen Walk we can catch a glimpse of the kind of world built on justice, equity and peace in which we would all like to live? Might this even be a foretaste of the world in which 'everything will be in its rightful place' so that people can enjoy 'the natural way of human living' in the time of Imam al-Mahdi, the last age of the earth?