

UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF RELIGION

(Text of Friday sermon delivered by Nasir Ahmad at the Lahore Ahmadiyya Centre, Wembley, London on 29th May, 2009.)

“Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.” (2:62).

“But those who were given the knowledge said: Woe to you! Allah’s reward is better for him who believes and does good, and none is made to receive this except the patient.

So We made the earth to swallow him up and his abode. He had no host to help him against Allah, nor was he of those who can defend themselves.

And those who had yearned for his place the day before began to say: Ah! (know) that Allah amplifies and straitens the means of subsistence for whom He pleases of His servants; had not Allah been gracious to us, He would have abased us. Ah! (know) that the ungrateful are never successful.” (28:80-82).

The verse from Chapter *Al-Baqarah* strikes at the root of the idea of a favoured nation whose members alone may be entitled to salvation. The subject is introduced here to show that even the Jews, notwithstanding their transgressions which had made them deserving Divine wrath, were entitled to a goodly reward if they believed and did good deeds.

This universal criterion of earning Allah’s pleasure and creating peace and amity among the fellow beings is and has been the message and objective of all the religions. Islam has perfected the message in all its details, and the Qur’an in this regard says: “This day have those who disbelieve despaired of your religion, so fear them not, and fear Me. This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion” (5:3).

The word “perfected” in this verse was, according to authentic traditions, the last revelation received on the eve of the triumphant entry of the Holy Prophet and his ten thousand companions into Makkah from where about ten years before they were forced to leave because of extreme persecution and denial of practice of their religious rites and obligations. It clearly brings to light the fact that the true Message of God started with the advent of the first Prophet, Adam, and was brought to perfection with the advent of the last Prophet, the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be on Him. The belief in *one* God and service to fellow human beings through good deeds and nobility has been the universal message of God to His messengers to reform and create love and amity among human beings on earth.

Of all the books of the Old Testament, the Psalms of David is full of praise for the Lord Who is the Creator of this universe and Who exhorts human beings to be righteous and to serve their fellow human beings, and that is the way which leads to Truth and to one earning

continued blessings and reward in the life hereafter. Let me quote some of the verses from Psalm No. 5:

1. Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation.
2. Harken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I pray.
3. My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.
4. For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee.
5. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity.
6. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.
7. But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple.
8. Lead me, O Lord, in Thy righteousness because of mine enemies; make thy way straight before my face.
9. For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.
10. Destroy Thou them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against Thee.
11. But let all those that put their trust in Thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because Thou defendest them: let them also that love Thy name be joyful in Thee.
12. For Thou, Lord, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield.

I am currently reading a very interesting book about Baba Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. It is written by a senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Mr. Syed Afzal Haider. Baba Nanak Ji undertook four long journeys, extending over a period of twenty-four years, to visit various holy places of different religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. His fourth journey was towards the Muslim sacred places, including Makkah and Madina. The author has written that before Baba Nanak started this fourth journey he dressed like a Muslim saint with a staff in his hand and a book under his arm. These were his constant companions. The book under his arm is now proved to be a copy of the Holy Qur'an. It is related about him that he always carried this book with him, which Sikh historians named *Pothi Sahib*. *Pothi* means a book. The Sikhs believe that this book is written in a heavenly language which nobody can read it and was given to Guru Ji by God.

A book written by the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, viz. *Sat Bachan* (The True Discourse), contains not only Baba Nanak's teachings from his

various discourses and compilations, but also mentions details of on-the-spot research of the Founder and his companions about the Pothi Sahib and the Chola Sahib – both regarded as sacred by Sikhs. Sikhs also believe the *Chola Sahib* to be the sacred will of Baba Guru Nanak. The details of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's research show that the Pothi Sahib is nothing but an old copy of the Holy Qur'an and that the *Chola* or Holy Cloak is embroidered with verses of the Qur'an and the Holy *Kalimah*, *La ilaha illallah Muhammadur Rasolullah* (There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger).

One of Baba Nanak's devoted followers, Bhai Gurudas, in his compilation, *Pehli Var*, *Pori No. 33*, has narrated that when Baba Ji reached Makkah, the pilgrims and the learned rightly guessed that Baba Nanak was a born Hindu. Therefore, the main question they asked him was: Which of the two religions, Hinduism and Islam, is the better religion? Guru Ji replied to their question in the form of a couplet in the Punjabi language:

*Baba aakhey haa-ji-yaa shubh 'am-laan baa-jhon do-no-ee ro-ee
Hindoo wa Musalmaan do-weyn dargh-ha under layn nah dho-ee*

It means:

O Pilgrims! Without good deeds both would weep.
It is only good deeds of either of them which are acceptable in the sight of the Great Master.

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement has devoted a whole chapter in *Sat Bachan* (pages 183 to 218), where he mentions that Baba Nanak undertook forty days of secluded religious meditation, called *Chilla*, while in Makkah, then Baghdad and on his return to India at several places such as Ajmer and various shrines in Multan. One peculiar aspect of his religious meditation was that he always engaged in such meditations facing the Ka'bah.

In one of Guru Ji's poems in triplet, which is recorded in a book entitled *Saakhi Bhaa-i waali waddi* (pp. 220 and 222), there is a Punjabi verse, *Ker-nee ka 'bah sach kalma karam nawaaj*, which means that noble deeds are in the commandments of the Ka'bah towards which we should all face, and to tell the truth is the advice of my Spiritual Master which guides us to the right path, and the Holy *Kalimah* is a recitation which brings good luck and makes our deeds noble.

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement had so much respect for Baba Guru Nanak that he even replied to criticisms by Pundit Dayanand of Baba Guru Nanak's concept of One God and other beliefs which were apparently against Hindu beliefs. Pundit Dayanand, a zealous Hindu Reformist and an extreme opponent of Islam, who, in his well-known book *Satyarath Parkash* not only divulged his filthy remarks about Islam and its Holy Founder, but also criticised Baba Nanak's teachings. It is an undeniable fact that the Holy Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement was the only person among the Muslims who, in all possible ways, tried to prove that all religions and their founders preached the true message of God to guide mankind to do good deeds and entertain love for their fellow human beings. Thus in this book he cleared the Founder of the Sikh religion of the baseless charges of the Hindu reformist levelled against him which, in fact, Baba Nanak had made to criticise the wrong beliefs of the Hindu religion.

The Holy Qur'an in one of its short chapters has referred to the limited life of man on this earth and has exhorted him to spend the time at his disposal by doing good deeds and exhorting the same to others by setting a good example. This is the task assigned by Allah to His messengers which they passed on to their followers – to make life worthwhile and to earn the pleasure of their Creator.

In the sacred book *Granth Sahib*, Baba Nanak says: “God is the Truth. He is the Dominant Manifestation. There is no limit to His Mercy. One should be seeking His blessings and thus He makes His servants free from all worries... All virtues and goodness belongs to Him. Not a single good action is mine except how much sincerity it contains. What can be the basis of a sincere act? Goodness is granted to him alone who sincerely makes an effort for it!”

-*-

The name of the chapter is *Al- 'Asr*, meaning *The Time*. Its English translation runs as follows:

“By the Time! Surely Man is in loss, except those who believe and do good, and believe and do good, and exhort one another to Truth, and exhort one another to patience” (102:1-3).

The Companions of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) were so fond of this chapter that whenever two Companions met they never separated without reciting it and reminding each other of it. The reason for this is that this chapter encapsulates the real object of man's life in just a few words, so much so that Imam Shafi'i, one of the four leading Jurists of Islam, opines that if only this chapter of the Qur'an was revealed, it would have been sufficient for mankind.

In this chapter, we are told that abundance of wealth, which makes us heedless of the consequences of our actions, is indeed a loss from which we should try to save ourselves, and we should never make it the purpose of our life. Instead, the goals of our existence should be faith, good actions and the exhortation to truth and to patience, for these constitute true honour and wealth, which will prove for us a lasting profit.

Al 'Asr means an era, time or the passing of time. Look how subtly the evidence of time has been put forward. The Holy Qur'an states that time is such a passing phenomenon that even a fleeting moment results in a reduction of man's lifespan. That is because man has been granted a limited period of time on this earth, and he should try to earn whatever he can, either by doing good deeds so as to reap the fruits of Paradise, or even by doing evil deeds or wasting his time in negligence, thus ruining this Divine gift of time and causing destruction to his future life. In fact, time is the most precious of all commodities. Each moment of it constitutes the foundation of our future happiness and peace, and its nature is such that it has to pass on. A passing moment can never be recalled. If we spend our time in a beneficial occupation, it becomes a treasure for us, and if we do not derive benefit from it, it goes to waste and results in manifest loss.

Look at the affairs of the world and you will observe that whoever does not value time inevitably suffers loss. The happiness and peace of man's future life, and his difficulties, too, depend on whether he employs his time in useful work or not.

When preparing for an examination, there is a date set for it. The student who works hard in this specified time and does not waste it comes out successful, but the one who dawdles and wastes his time remains in futility and loss.

Today Europe has recognised how precious time is and values it so that it derives benefit from it. As a result, as regards worldly pursuits, they are a very successful people. Therefore, the secret of success and of avoiding loss is to engage oneself in profitable occupations and not squander time. Allah, Most High, has set a limit to man's existence on earth, so whoever even for a moment does not spend his time on something useful, ends up a loser. The person who, while celebrating his birthday every year thinks that he has added another year to his life forgets the fact that in fact his life has been reduced by a year.

A poet has beautifully explained the fleeting nature of time in an Urdu couplet: "O heedless one, the clock proclaims this announcement that every moment that the Creator has reduced your life by another tick."

Thus, whoever spends his time in useful work is successful, and whoever wastes it, ends up in loss. Thus, since man's present life is a preparation for a future existence, then if he does not spend every moment of this life in trying to make the next life higher and better, he will definitely suffer loss.

Therefore, the Holy Qur'an says that time is passing on and as it goes on and leaves man in loss, except of course those who have deep faith and do good deeds and exhort others to truth and to patience and steadfastness. This does not mean that one should renounce the world, for in that case there will be no good deeds. Remaining in the world, making strenuous effort, working for wealth, and fulfilling one's obligations to others are all evidence of work, whether good or bad. So if he were to leave the world or take to monkery, then man will be deprived of all those endeavours which contribute to the perfection of his attributes.

So here it is not a matter of renouncing the world, but instead, religion is meant, or in other words, faith and the doing of good deeds refer to belief in those principles, acting upon them by means of which we can fulfil our obligations according to the pleasure of Allah to the world. That is, we can observe our duties to Allah and perform our obligations to our fellow human beings. And these are indeed what Allah, Most High, has taught us through His prophets, especially Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Faith is inextricably bound up with good deeds. Mere profession of belief in a particular truth cannot bring us any benefit, unless we act in accordance with it. For example, it is a truism that water quenches thirst, and that food satisfies hunger is also true. But, unless we actually drink water, the belief that water will do away with our thirst will be of no use to us. Similarly, unless we eat food, our hunger will not leave us. Mere belief in their properties will bring no comfort to us.

Accordingly, the purpose of belief in Allah, angels, books, messengers and the day of Resurrection cannot be attained by mere lip profession. To derive full benefit from them, we must pattern our actions strictly in accordance with the principles in which we believe.

So, although principles of faith are given to man by Allah for his guidance, and are such that are considered essential for the enhancement of his future life, and solely through His free Mercy (*Rahmaniyyat*) He has taught them to man through the agency of His prophets,

nevertheless, if these principles are as important as beliefs, they are equally important as an impetus to action.

Thus it is a fact that through faith and good actions a man can cultivate and perfect himself. But Allah has firmly stated here that the purpose of man's life is not limited to his own self – that is, that he should only look after the reformation of himself alone, but he also has a social obligation to fulfil. In other words, he must also concern himself with the reformation of others, too, otherwise he will still suffer some loss.

That obligation is to exhort others to truth and to patience and perseverance. The meaning of *wasiyyat* (exhortation) is giving advice on which great emphasis is placed. Therefore, whatever advice or guidance a dying person gives is also a *wasiyyat* (will). Hence, it is incumbent on a Muslim who believes in the principles of truth and sincerity, and acts according to them, to impart them to those who are related to him, and also to encourage them to develop patience.

By *sabr* (patience) is meant sticking steadfastly to the legal commands of Allah and also accepting His decrees, that is, steadfastness in obeying whatever we are told to do in the *Shari'ah* (Law) and avoiding everything that we are commanded to shun, and accepting whatever Allah has decreed for us, whether happiness or sadness. Whatever fate may befall us, we should remain firm in obedience to the Law, and accept cheerfully what Allah has ordained for us. Thus, just as it is the duty of a believer to impart the principle of truth to others, so it is for him to encourage them to develop patience, that is, to advise them that in accepting the truth, they should endure all difficulties and opposition with patience and never swerve even an inch from the path of truth. Furthermore, whatever truths they accept, they should keep on acting upon them, and they should display such determination that in difficulty or in tranquillity, in happiness or sadness, in short, whatever the condition in which they find themselves, they should never deviate from the path of obedience to Allah, Most High.

We all know that elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an Allah, Most High, says: "*Lima taquluna maa la taf'alun*" (Why do you say that which you do not? – 61:2). So, whatever a believer enjoins on another person he must first do himself. Here we must keep in mind that the command to exhort one another to truth corresponds with the command *amanu* (those who believe). Similarly, to exhort one another to patience refers to *'amilus-salihati* (those who do good deeds). In the first instance, if a believer encourages another person to accept the truth, then how can he accept or do anything that is contrary to truth?

Thus, *amanu* means those who accept the truth. Therefore, in the terminology of the Holy Qur'an, erroneous or false doctrines cannot be called truth. So to consider filthy, polytheistic and false teachings as faith is manifestly against the Holy Qur'an. Thus it is the duty of a believer to believe in truth and persuade others to do the same. In the same way, a believer cannot justly encourage others to have patience if he himself does not practice it, and this points to the fact that patience and good deeds go together.

It is also a fact that a good deed cannot bear fruit unless we are constant at it. For instance, if a believer performs *salah* (prayers) for thirty years then abandons it, or if he speaks the truth throughout his life but for one year before he dies he begins to engage in falsehood, then because of his lack of constancy he has vitiated all the good things he did before. A dishonest person and bribe taker cannot be excused on the grounds that for two years before his crime

he was an honest person. Similarly, a present drinker cannot escape scot-free because he never used to drink before. Reference to this has been made by our Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) when he says that a person may be doing good deeds for a long time until he is just a span away from the doors of Paradise when he suddenly falls into Hell. The reason for this is that he did not display lasting perseverance, and so he was deprived of the fruit that was his. Another example is that of a person who begins to dig a well and goes down thirty feet and then leaves off in discouragement. If he only knew that by digging two feet deeper he would have struck water! So his lack of tenacity resulted in all his efforts going to waste. That is why the Sufis say: “*Al istiqamat fauqal karamat*” (Perseverance is the greatest of all miracles).

Hazrat Bayazid Bistami was a saint of a very high order. Once a person went to him and stayed with him for a few years. At the end of this time he addressed the saint thus: “Sir, I came to you because your renown as a holy man has spread far and wide, but during all this time I have not seen you perform anything extraordinary or miraculous.”

The saint asked him: “For the whole year, did you hear me say anything or do anything that was contrary to the Holy Qur’an and the *Sunnah* of our Holy Prophet Muhammad?”

When the person replied in the negative, the saint asked him: “What greater miracle then can you ask of me?”

And it is the truth that constancy in doing good deeds is the vehicle which transports a man to his final destination in life.

Thus in this chapter *patience* is connected with *good deeds*, for a good deed cannot be considered as such if we do it for a time and then abandon it, or if in the face of a trial we give it up or turn away from it. So it is the duty of a believer to act upon the truths in which he professes belief, and further he should do so with such zeal and enthusiasm that sadness or even happiness must not make him deviate from it.

It is then that his efforts reach that stage where they can be termed *good deeds* in the real sense, and they become the *source of producing* higher and perfect results. In other words, good deeds and constancy are inseparable. That is why a believer exhorts another person to both good deeds and patience.

To conclude, in this chapter, a believer is given two responsibilities by performing which he can save himself from loss and make himself a worthy inheritor of true honour and genuine riches. They are:

- Personal or self reformation
- Social or the reformation of others

Unless the believer acquits himself of these two tasks, he cannot consider himself free from responsibility.

Further, for each task, there are two compulsory stipulations. Firstly, as regards his personal development, he must display great tenacity in living according to these principles.

Secondly, there are two important matters pertaining to his duty of reforming others: he must encourage others to have faith and also advise them to display steadfastness in living according to their professed principles of truth. In other words, the believer must inculcate in himself the truth and must establish it through his actions. It is only when he has persuaded others to accept faith and to establish it by means of their conduct that he can be said to have fulfilled his obligations. Then will he have attained the purpose of his existence, thereby saving himself from loss and becoming the recipient of blessings and benefits. It is incumbent, therefore, on each believer to seek strenuously this honour and wealth in which there is lasting benefit and an absence of loss.

In the words *Al 'Asr* there is a reference to the time of our Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), for that was a special age – a compendium of all ages in an abbreviated form and universal example and model. Look at the example of those who valued time and benefited from it, that is, the Companions (*rta*) of the Holy Prophet (pbuh), and see how they attained the goal of their lives and saved themselves from loss. Conversely, consider those who spurned the value of time and wasted it, and see how they made themselves the recipients of loss in this life and the next.

Look again at that glorious age of the people who accepted the truth that the Holy Prophet (pbuh) brought to the world and patterned and established their lives on it, and see how neither calamity nor persecution could shake them. But more than that, they considered it their sacred duty to encourage others to faith in Allah, and to convince them to act according to it to such an extent that they were willing to undergo all kinds of sacrifice. Let us ask ourselves this question: In the history of the world, is there any other nation that achieved the goal of their lives, and made themselves the inheritors of the blessings of this world and the next as these people did?

On the other hand, in opposition to them, there was another group who rejected the truth and abused time. In fact, they actively stood in the way of the preaching and propagation of this truth. See, too, how as losers in this life and the Hereafter there is no parallel to them in history.

But should we only confine ourselves to that age? Even today there are Muslims who claim to have true faith, but they neither act according to their professed belief nor do they encourage others to have faith. So, if they suffer humiliation after humiliation in this life, is it not just what the Holy Qur'an warned us about? And is this not a just punishment for those who are merely nominal Muslims, and who squander their lives in frivolities? Or for those who believe and act righteously themselves, but neglect their duty to invite others to the faith? Can they be saved from the degrading loss that this chapter warns us about?

So exhortation of doing good deeds has been the universal message of all the prophets and holy personages. The Holy Qur'an being the Guardian and Preserver of all the truths contained in the previous scriptures has rightly emphasised this message in different ways so that man in his limited life can derive maximum benefit out of the Divine gift of Allah.

May Allah guide us and grant us strength, conviction and zeal to ennoble this worldly life by good deeds and serving our fellow human beings according to the wishes of the Divine Creator.

May Allah grant us conviction and strength of faith to follow His commandments and the precepts of the Holy Prophet, may peace and blessings of Allah be on him, to do good deeds with constancy, and to set noble examples for others.

Sources:

1. English translation of the Holy Qur'an by Hazrat Maulana Muhammad Ali.
2. *Baba Nanak*: Syed Afzal Haider, Dost Publications, Islamabad (Pakistan), 2005.
3. English translation of *Anwarul Qur'an*, Part 30 by Dr. Basharat Ahmad, Ahmadiyya Muslim Literary Trust, Trinidad and Tobago.