

Husayn and Karbala: a role model for humanity

The questions faced by Husayn were questions that run throughout human life in every time and situation. What should I do when I know that something is wrong? Do I say something or keep quiet? What should I do when injustice and tyranny are walking the streets and people are looking to me for an example? Should I look the other way and hope that it will go away? Should I take action or just talk about it? What about my responsibilities as a leader? If I cave in to injustice then will not everyone else think the same way and follow my example? Is there anything more important than preserving my own life? Even stronger: Is there anything worth dying for? What do I really think about life after death?

Who was Husayn?

All Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the last scripture sent to the earth by God. It is the final, universal guidance for all humankind. Similarly, Muhammad is the last Prophet to be sent to the earth. The Qur'an was given to Muhammad between 610 and 632 CE. The question is: Who should lead the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad in 632? Shi'a Muslims believe that God gave clear guidance that leaders after Muhammad had to come from the Ahl al-Bayt, the Family of the Prophet. These were descended from Muhammad and his first wife Khadija, through their daughter Fatima. She married a cousin of Muhammad called Ali and together they had two sons called Hasan and Husayn.

These five people: Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Husayn form the core of the Ahl al-Bayt and its later generations were descended from them. There is an incident recorded in the Qur'an where God purified these five and raised them to be the highest of all humanity. They were people of the highest degree of spirituality. They were blessed by God with knowledge that only God could give and thus they were chosen to be leaders of the Muslim community. In Shi'a understanding, Ali, Hasan and Husayn were the first three divinely-appointed leaders of the Muslim community. They had a duty to lead and guide the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad.

Husayn was the second son of Ali and Fatima and born in 626. He was the grandson of Muhammad and only six years old when the Prophet died. Muhammad treated the two boys as though they were his own children. They drank in the values and practices of extended family life in his company. He loved to play with them and was always calling them to be near him. There was one famous occasion when Muhammad was leading the prayers with one of his grandsons beside him. As he bowed down to the ground to prostrate before God, the boy climbed up onto his shoulders. Muhammad waited with his forehead on the floor until his grandson had climbed all the way up to his

neck where Muhammad could hold on to him and let him ride on his back until the end of the prayer.

Political unrest

When Muhammad died, a powerful group amongst the Muslims decided that they should follow another, older man as Head of the Community. There was another group who decided to stay loyal to Ali, as they held him to be the choice of God and Muhammad; they are today called the Shi'a. Ali finally took over as head of the whole Muslim community in 656 but there was division and eventually fighting between different groups of Muslims. Ali was killed at Kufa in Iraq in 661 after naming his first son, Hasan, to lead the community after him. The Shi'a call these leaders Imams (with a capital I) and so Ali was the first Imam and Hasan the second.

The old clan system amongst the Arabs took over after Ali's death; they did not want Hasan to be the leader. The aristocrats from before the time of Muhammad rose to power in Syria and decided that their provincial governor, a man called Mu'awiya, should lead the Muslims. This was the start of the Umayyad dynasty. They quickly became corrupt and were passing the power amongst their own clan members and not using the money of the Muslim community in the right way. The kind of life that they lived often did not follow the guidance of the Qur'an and teaching of Muhammad.

Imam Hasan was still recognised by the Shi'a and acknowledged by others as a spiritual leader. He withdrew from public life and came to an agreement with Mu'awiya to keep out of politics. He eventually died in 669 after having nominated Husayn as the third Imam to succeed him. Husayn lived in Madina and kept to Hasan's agreement until Mu'awiya died in 680. Before Mu'awiya died, he named his son Yazid to take over as leader. There was bound to be trouble as Yazid had a bad reputation for not observing the Muslim way of life.

When Yazid came to power, he decided to demand an oath of allegiance from everyone, including Husayn. Now Husayn was put on the spot. What should he do? Should he give an oath of allegiance to a tyrant who did not observe the Muslim code of living? What kind of an example would that be from someone who had been appointed by God to be the leader and give guidance to others? Could he stand aside and allow injustice to overcome the truth? He must have thought of a saying traced back to Muhammad: "The greatest *jihad* is to speak the word of truth in the face of a tyrant."

The journey to Karbala begins

Imam Husayn decided that he could not give an oath of allegiance to a tyrant. At the same time, he did not want to provoke Yazid as this might lead to wholesale bloodshed. He decided to move himself and his family to Makka.

Surely, he thought, Yazid's agents will respect the holy city. Tyrants rule by oppression and fear. There were many ordinary Muslims who supported Husayn but they were afraid to speak out for fear of Yazid and his men.

Just at this time, a message reached Husayn from the city of Kufa in Iraq. This was the city in which Ali had lived before his death and in which he died. They had supported both Ali and Hasan but they could not be relied upon. They blew hot and cold in their support for the Imams. They asked Husayn to come to them and guide them on the right path. They promised their support but could they be trusted? Husayn sent one of his advisers to go to Kufa to find out how things stood. Yazid knew that there was unrest and appointed a tough governor for Kufa to stamp out any support for Husayn. In the end, Husayn's adviser was killed and the people of Kufa went back on their invitation for fear of the governor.

Nevertheless Husayn set out to go to Kufa. "They need me," he said, "I have a duty that must be done." He did not want to see bloodshed in the holy city of Makka and had heard that Yazid's agents were on their way to demand the oath of allegiance from him. He set out with his family and a few dozen armed men plus their wives and children. They were shadowed on their way by a group of soldiers led by a man called al-Hurr. Their orders were not to allow Husayn to turn back or to visit any of the towns and villages along the route. They were to shepherd them towards the city of Kufa and keep watch over them.

An incident is recorded when al-Hurr and his men rode into Husayn's camp. They had been days in the desert and were thirsty. Husayn noticed the state of the men and gave orders that they and their horses were to be given water to drink from the store gathered by Husayn's followers. This act of kindness touched al-Hurr and caused him to think, as we will see later. When the time of prayer came round, both groups of people, Husayn's party and the shadowing soldiers lined up for prayer as one congregation with Husayn acting as prayer leader.

The pressure on Husayn's followers in Kufa built up and some escaped the city to join Husayn in the desert. His party now numbered seventy-two men plus the women and children. Orders came to prevent them going towards Kufa but instead to direct them towards the plain of Karbala. Husayn refused any suggestion that he should make an escape to the hills but rather preferred to stay and do his duty. Once they reached Karbala, the opposing army surrounded them and cut them off on every side. They were even prevented from going to the river to fetch water.

The massacre at Karbala

During the days at Karbala, there were acts of heroism. Abbas, the half-brother of Husayn, made a valiant attempt to break through to fetch water for the

women and children. He was cut down in the attempt. It was clear that they were massively outnumbered; Husayn had seventy-two armed men and the enemy were numbered in thousands. They suffered terribly from thirst. Husayn went forward with his infant son in his arms to beg the opposing forces to have mercy on the child and give him water. He was willing to leave the child on a rock for them to give him water so that there could be no suspicion of a trick. Instead they shot and killed the six-months-old Ali Asghar with an arrow through the throat.

Word reached Husayn that Yazid had sent orders that he was not to be allowed to leave the field of Karbala until he had taken the oath of allegiance. The end was drawing close. That night Husayn assembled his people and pleaded with them to leave him and save themselves. It was Husayn that they wanted and his companions might have been able to escape. They refused to leave their Imam and declared that they would prefer to stay and die with him rather than try to save themselves.

Finally orders were given to the army that they were to attack and kill Husayn. The one who had commanded the forces who led Husayn to the place of his death, al-Hurr, realised what he had done. He broke with the opposing forces and rode to Husayn's side. He threw himself at Husayn's feet to beg for forgiveness. Husayn raised him up, forgave him and restored him to human dignity. He would remain with Husayn, fight with his small company and die with valour fighting against his former comrades in arms. There was an all-out attack but the odds were impossible. One by one, Husayn's men were killed until he alone was left standing but badly wounded. Then the soldiers turned on him, killed him and cut off his head. It was the tenth day of the new year in the Islamic calendar, the tenth of Muharram 680, Ashura Day.

After the battle

There was to be no respect shown to the party of Husayn, even after they were dead. The soldiers were given orders to ride their horses over the bodies and smash them into the sand. They were to be denied the dignity of burial.

The women and children were taken into captivity in chains. They were taken – along with the head of Husayn – to Kufa where they were humiliated and ridiculed. Then they were taken to Damascus as prisoners and further subjected to ridicule and taunts. In the party were Zaynab, the sister of Husayn, and his only surviving son, who was sick on the day of battle and so could not take part. This son, Ali ibn Husayn, also known as Zayn al-Abidin, was now the Fourth Imam of the Muslim community. After some time in Damascus, they were set free and allowed to return to Madina, where they lived a quiet non-political life.

Commemoration

The events of the first ten days of Muharram are remembered every year in solemn commemoration. Each night the Shi'a Muslims gather and re-tell the events of that day. There is deep mourning and people are brought to tears by recalling the tragedy. Many people, especially the women, wear black mourning clothes and black drapes are hung in mosques and community halls. This is a time of reflection on one's own life and re-dedication to the spirit of Husayn and Karbala. People reflect upon and reject elements of their lives that are more like the brutish tendencies of Yazid and vow to become more and more like Husayn. Emotions run high and people dedicate themselves to be ready to stand firm for justice and truth like Husayn. "If only I had been there on that day, I would have stood firm and died with the Imam," they pledge.

The mourning reaches its climax on the tenth day, Ashura Day. There is often a solemn procession and the final battle is re-enacted. There is great lamentation and mourning. Men and women strike their chests as a sign of their grieving. In modern societies, like Britain, the custom has developed of setting up a blood donation centre so that people can express their willingness to sacrifice their blood for those in need. No celebrations take place during the whole period – the first ten days of Muharram and then the thirty days of mourning afterwards.

The Spirit of Karbala lives on

Something truly terrible happened on the field of Karbala. Not even fifty years after the death of Muhammad, the Muslim community was so divided that they massacred the grandson of their beloved Prophet. This is truly the shadow-side of human nature. An act of betrayal and brutality that would move the hearts of anyone who hears – Muslim or non-Muslim. This is what human beings are capable of doing! At the same time, there is the reminder of the highest form of human commitment and devotion. To stand and die for a cause that is right and not give way to the forces of oppression.

Islam is a complete way of life that must be lived out in practice. It is not just a system of beliefs; faith demands action. The dedication to God and the way of truth and justice must be lived out in practice, even against overwhelming odds. Each human being has a duty, according to Islam, to promote the good in life and oppose the forces of evil. We have no right to sit back and allow injustice to rule the earth. In the ways of the world, might wins out against right but in the ways of God, right is victorious over might. Who remembers today the thousands of soldiers involved in the massacre? Yet the names and deeds of Husayn and his small company of faithful followers live on as though the field of Karbala was only yesterday. Victory with God is not determined by numbers but by the rightness of the cause.

Husayn stands as a beacon that all human beings can appreciate and follow. He was one of those chosen by God and given the highest gifts of spiritual excellence and right conduct. He trusted totally in God, even at the cost of his own life. God would somehow vindicate him and his sacrificial death would not be in vain. Karbala shows the depths to which human beings can stoop but it also shows the heights that the human spirit can rise to when the cause is just and when there is total trust in the mercy of God. It stands as a reminder to all humankind that injustice and tyranny must be opposed – at every place and in every time. Human beings are given the high dignity of freedom to choose; it is one of the things that mark us out as humans. We can choose right, good and justice and reject wrong, evil and injustice.

Husayn is called the Prince of Martyrs. He sacrificed his life in obedience to God's will rather than give in to injustice. Husayn knew that he was going to his death; he went to his death at Karbala "with eyes wide open", knowing what was about to happen. Martyrs have been given the highest honour and respect in many different religions. The same too within the Christian tradition. A martyr is one who freely submits all to God's will, whatever might happen, even death at the hands of those who oppose the ways of God. A martyr is one who sacrifices this life for the life of Paradise. Death with justice brings joy to the human heart but life with oppression brings suffering.

The martyrdom of Husayn acts as an example to all humankind not to consider the might of the forces of those who oppose justice and right conduct but rather to consider the nature of the cause itself. The innocent suffer and remain for ever as a reminder to later generations. In an age when we have industrialised the killing of others, when we do not count the fallen human beings on the side of the enemy but regard them as not worthy of decent burial and respect, Karbala reminds us that every human being, even the enemy dead, are of infinite importance in the sight of God.

As a Christian reflecting on the martyrdom of Husayn, there are obvious parallels to the death of Jesus. He too was an innocent who suffered unjustly at the hands of those who did not recognise his message and preferred to rid the world of his example and teaching. He too went to his death trusting that God would vindicate him and not let his suffering go for nothing. He too died in relative obscurity yet his memory lives on in the hearts of millions, two thousand years later. God can take "the seed that falls to the ground and dies" and raise up from it a model and mighty victory that lives through all ages as a sign to human beings to strive for their ideals and trust in God, come what may.

The example of Husayn and his companions in martyrdom does not belong to Muslims alone but to all humankind. It is a role model to avoid conflict if possible but when it comes to be courageous in resisting the forces of oppression. Husayn sets an example of treating the enemy with dignity, kindness, generosity, compassion and forgiveness. He shows by his death that

this life is not all that there is but eternal life with God is a reality to be embraced when the time comes. Thus he sets a role model that all human beings can appreciate and a spirit that lives on in human history for all ages.