

In a Time of Global Pain the World's Open Wounds – and the Remedy

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“O people! Spread peace, share what you have and pray even as others sleep! Then will ye enter Paradise!” So said the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, – on him be peace and salutations, – upon his entry into the desert oasis of Yathrib, which would become known to the world as Madinah. At once law and social guideline, this precious pearl was narrated as a Hadith by Abdullah ibn Salam, whose identity is as significant as his testimony, for ibn Salam was then no less than the leading Rabbi among Yathrib's large Jewish community and one of the most learned men in the Arabian peninsula. In the full text of the Hadith, Abdullah ibn Salam recounts: *“The people had gone out to greet God's Messenger upon his arrival [in Madinah]. The general cry in that hour was, ‘The Messenger of Allah has arrived!’, so I joined the crowd to get a good look at him. When I gazed upon his face, I knew that this was not the visage of the untruthful ones. In his very first general proclamation, he said, ‘O people! Spread peace, share your sustenance, and pray even as others sleep! Then will ye enter Paradise!’”* (Hadith narrated by Abdullah ibn Salam in Tirmidhi, 2485). While Abdullah ibn Salam could discern truth in the Prophet's physiognomy alone, fourteen centuries on, the Prophet's ﷺ words resonate louder than ever. They compel us to face up to Truth and to embrace it, to face down falsehood and to reject it. For, what we are confronted by today, is a world in the throes of agony, of pain on a

globe-spanning scale.

All of us daily bear witness to murderous destruction in global conflicts, stark inequality and economic hardship, natural disasters, and all directly or indirectly, caused by a callous indifference to human suffering, by the failures of leadership and arrogance of power. This is ultimately down to the ancient mischief that is human greed. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the human race, collectively, has discarded its moral compass even as those in positions of responsibility show no inclination to empathy for the sake of humanity. How else to interpret the callous blind eye turned to the killing of innocent Palestinians? The fact that the overwhelming majority of the victims are comprised of women and children as described by independent bodies ranging from United Nations agencies to international relief organisations and human rights groups. Turning a blind eye to these human crises has little to offer in the way of just solutions and a sincere desire for peace, for all those engaged in the associated disciplines of international law, human rights law, of universal humanitarianism, are decisively confronted by a reckoning with their conscience.

We have spoken before about the great challenges faced by mankind and how these challenges contain the potential to threaten the very future of the human race. It is worth revisiting – and reminding ourselves – that repetition was the stock in trade of God's emissaries, as was the continual heedlessness that attended their proclamations. But the scorn of the heedless deterred neither God's prophets nor those who follow in their wake with wisdom, sincerity and compassion. Indeed, wisdom, sincerity and compassion – so sorely absent in our contemporary world – are essential to tackling the many problems that confront humanity: deep inequality and disenfranchisement, social and cultural fracture, sectarian strife, realpolitik – and concomitant humanitarian crises – and the long shadow of irreversible ecological damage. Some of these problems are historically deep-rooted while others recur in cycles, having the appearance of the moment only because of humanity's peculiar problem of forgetfulness and failure to learn the lessons of history. What is almost always absent is the collective sense of responsibility and genuine cooperation. This is especially tragic considering the fact of an inter-connected world in which humanity is now squeezed into one



Al-Anbiya 21, 107

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global village, a reality that demands we think globally. This means foregoing parochialism, and looking beyond national or regional self-interest and, instead, to connect with all the constituent parts of the global village. We have oft mentioned that to think globally is a fundamental characteristic of Islam, its supreme expression is, *"And We sent you not except as a mercy unto all the worlds."* (Qur'an, *Al-Anbiya'*, 21:107). In the spirit of spreading mercy unto all the worlds, to think globally necessarily means to reach out, to connect, to feel and to care and share. Hence, *"Now, We have not sent thee otherwise than to mankind at large, to be a herald of glad tidings and a warner..."* (Qur'an, *Saba'*, 34:28). And we are bound to mention that, for their part, Muslim societies *"...Believe in God and His Apostle...and follow him, so that you might find guidance."* (Qur'an, *Al-A'raf*, 7:158). Suffice to say belief alone is not enough without the animating spirit of action, but what we have here also is an illustration of the virtuous circle. If we do believe in God and His Apostle and desire to follow him, then should we find that we are guided aright, which condition would, in turn, produce scrutiny of our motives and impulses, – the virtuous circle. Thereby did Joseph in Egypt, even after his exoneration before the king's law, engage in self-reflection, *"And yet, I am not trying to absolve myself: for, verily, man's inner self does incite to evil, and saved are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows His grace. Behold, my Sustainer is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!"* (Qur'an, *Yusuf*, 12:53). Joseph, of course, sought not revenge but to spread mercy. This brings us back to the Prophet's ﷺ first, great announcement upon his arrival in Yathrib, and the testimony thereof by Abdullah ibn Salam (who was famously denounced by his Jewish contemporaries when it was discovered that their erstwhile own leading Rabbi had adopted Islam). Aspects of rabbinical study had taught Ibn Salam to anticipate the coming of a divine emissary in the Arabian desert, although he had fully expected such a figure to come forth from his community. If the Divine Messenger's physiognomy had impressed ibn Salam, that first encounter amidst the multitude in the open air was enough to convince him of the divine nature of the Message, *"Spread peace, share what you have, and pray even as others do sleep!"* For ibn Salam had fully grasped what the Prophet meant by *"spread peace"* the promotion of a culture of peace. As one of Yathrib's notable figures, ibn Salam was acutely conscious of the bitter inter- and intra-clan rivalries that existed among both Jewish and Arab clan groupings in the oasis town. And here was one, universally praised,

whose very features marked him out as truthful, exhorting the people to support peace, to foster peace, to nurture and to cultivate peace. And ibn Salam had intuitively understood what the Prophet ﷺ meant by *"share your sustenance"*, accessible to all, which of course represents the very pillars of social justice and equality. In the face of intertwined economic crises, erosion of essential public services and 'safety nets', the social condition of much of the world's population is desperate hunger, hopeless destitution and agonising death, while unimaginable wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few, be they multinational corporations or individuals. What, then, might ibn Salam have comprehended by the Prophet's ﷺ exhortation to *"pray even as others do sleep!"*? The erudite rabbi, whose life in Yathrib revolved around daily Torah study, teaching in the synagogue and managing his date orchard, once more discerned the deeper, layered, meanings behind the call to pray whilst others sleep: to train one's self to forego worldly comfort for communion with the divine is only obvious as a primary interpretation; beyond that, the Prophet ﷺ desired that those who would follow him do so with sincerity, to be attentive and keep vigil over their own inner- and outer-states in that they are mindful of their actions; and this enlightened state would keep them alert to creeping dangers that threaten the peace. They would stand in stark contrast to those that *"sleep"*, the heedless, inattentive ones, who 'see no evil, hear no evil' in their comatose existence, – that is to say, the blind worshipper. This world, this global village of six billion inhabitants, groans in pain, yet mankind does possess the remedy to bring about relief: to enjoy life in peace, we must learn to spread peace, to enjoy the peace of sound sleep, we must share resources to sustain all. We must strive with sincerity, with vigilant hearts so that we avoid the fate of those who see no evil and hear no evil in their sleepwalk to doom. For those of us who believe in God and His Apostle, we are certain to be guided if we commit to follow him – on him salutations! The Prophet ﷺ has shown how we might navigate the world: *"They that abide by God's injunctions and ordinances are like those who drew lots to secure their berths on a ship. Some found their seats on the upper deck and some on the lower deck. When those on the lower deck required water, they clambered onto the upper deck and this produced much consternation to the passengers on top. When the passengers on the lower deck sensed that they were perceived as bothersome to their top-deck neighbours, they said, 'Let us drill a hole in our part of the ship [to attain water] so that we do not trouble those*

above!' When those who had secured passage on the top deck came to know, they naturally intervened; had they allowed those on the lower deck to carry out their ill-advised scheme, all aboard would have perished. By preventing them, all were saved." (Hadith narrated by An-Nu'man ibn Bashir in Sahih Al-Bukhari; 2493).

If we acknowledge that the problems confronting humanity stem from injustice, the very antithesis of mercy and compassion, then just dealing must

underscore our notions of what is humane, while compassionate interaction is what distinguishes the human from the brute creation. Thus God commands: "*O you who believe, be upright before God, witnesses in equity. Let not hatred of a people cause you not to be just; be just, that is nearer to God-fearing. And fear God; surely God is aware of what you do.*" (Qur'an, *Al-Ma'eda*, 5:8).

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