

Perspectives

Written March 2003

This was written in March 2003 in response to the war in Iraq that had commenced several weeks earlier. However the sentiments expressed in the following paragraphs is still, to my mind, pertinent today for me and one I wish to share with the readers....

Since September 11 2001, I've been trying to understand why bad things occur - why are there people dying in Africa, why the Holocaust, why the genocide in Bosnia, why the conflict in Palestine...and these few weeks, why this war with Iraq. I mentioned to someone that I thought to compile the regions around the world where conflicts/war/suffering is occurring at the moment, and so I went about doing just that. Can you believe the amount of information I got from my search? I was just overwhelmed.

And so I sat down, these last few days, thinking back to the question of why? As a Muslim, a person who believes in the presence of God, I find myself asking a question which as a child I asked my parents - why would God let people suffer? Why do the rich, the dictators, the oppressors, all the bad people get all the material wealth and power they crave? Where is the justice in all this?

Tonight, as I lay down to sleep - I am supposed to be asleep so that I can attend class tomorrow/today - an old story came to my mind, and its grip on me was such that I had to write this, and so here it is. These are my thoughts on the questions I've asked above and I hope to share with you.

The following story is taken from the Quran (Chapter 18: Verse 60-82). I'll summarise the story below before making my point.

Moses and the Sage

Moses once asserted himself to be the wisest of all men and was rebuked by God. He was then told of a sage who was wiser than him, and Moses eagerly searched for the man. Upon finding the sage, Moses asked if he could accompany him on his journey hoping to learn from him.

The sage replied that he was afraid that Moses would not have patience with him for how could he have patience about something he didn't understand and had no experience of. But Moses promised him that he would try to be patient and that he would obey the sage.

So they journeyed together till they reached the shore, where the sage made a hole in the boat they were using. Moses protested, saying, "Why have you made a hole in

it? Are you trying to drown the people who may use it?" He then accused the sage of doing something terrible.

The sage reminded him of his promise and Moses apologized. They then went on till they met a young man. This time, the sage killed the man.

Once again, Moses protested and accused the sage of doing something so terrible as to kill an innocent man. The sage rebuked him by reminding him of his promise. This time Moses apologized and made another promise; if he next protested against the sage's actions, they would part ways.

And so they went on till they came to a town. They asked the villagers for food but were refused any hospitality. In that village was a wall on the verge of collapsing. The sage then repaired it. Moses was perplexed and questioned his actions.

The sage then told him that this was the parting of ways between them. He further explained the meaning behind his actions to Moses. The first incident involved the boat. It belonged to some poor people who used it for their livelihood. However, there was a king who would seize the boat by brute force. The damage was to ensure that the king would not seize it and it would be left to the people to repair it and reuse it again.

The second incident was that of the young man. Here, the sage revealed, that the man's parents were true believers while he would grow up to bring grief to them by being exceedingly wicked. He further revealed that God would grant them another child who would be more loving to them.

The third incident was that of the wall. It belonged to two orphans in the town and there was a treasure belonging to them underneath it. The wall prevented the villagers from finding the treasure and denying the orphans their rights before they were able to defend it. He also reminded Moses that he did not do the actions by his own will, but through the knowledge God had given him.

Now, some might ask why this story has bearing on what is going on in Iraq and many parts of the world right this moment. And some might say that this is a religious story and have no consequence here. I believe there is a lesson to be learned here by all, Muslims or Non-Muslims, those who believe in God or those who don't, because the story is about human nature and human knowledge.

We see in the figures of Moses and the sage two fellows who have different viewpoints and knowledge of the situations they are faced with. Each reacts according to his own knowledge. In view of the anti-war and pro-war sentiments currently seen throughout the world, I believe once again that these two figures portray the two sides of the Iraq war, and perhaps the various sides to all the conflicts that have been and are going on. There has to be respect for all the viewpoints even if we disagree with one another because who knows truly which of us is right? The truth will only be known in the future.

I'm anti-war myself, based on the knowledge I have. But I cannot deny that the coalition forces are acting under a different type of knowledge that I may not have. I cannot deny that I don't know a lot of things about this war or about the other conflicts I've discovered in my search, a realization Moses came to at the end. I'm not justifying which viewpoint or actions are right, but am acknowledging that each person's actions are based on his knowledge and his interest.

Regarding the three incidents, they represent much of the goings on in today's world. The poor being oppressed and their rights taken away by their rulers is represented by the first incident. The loss of the boat is a misfortune seen through the eyes of Moses, but it could be recovered.

If the sage had not sunk the boat, the king might have killed the people just to get his hands on it. In the same way, misfortune of the poor people today, the loss of livelihoods, might seem tragic to us, but as long as they are alive and not killed, they can recover and rebuild their lives. Perhaps too, it is a test of their iman.

The loss of the young man may cause sadness to his parents, but life goes on. The promise of another child, a better one, represents hope that the future can be better even though currently it seems bleak. While I do not wish to see death and destruction in the world, this story brings about the reality that the future for those who lost loved ones can be better even though it doesn't seem so at the time. As long as they keep opening their hearts to accept new 'people' as in the case of the man's parents accepting the new child into their hearts. In my life, I've experienced this myself, even if it is not to the extent the people in the various wars have experienced. My mother's death made way for my stepmother and my precious little brother to enter my life.

The third incident is probably the most ironic. The people of the town didn't deserve the good deed but they got it all the same, as if their luck is always good. But things are not what they seem, as the story implies. Maybe down the line, things will be revealed that in fact what seemed like good luck/fortune is truly not what is best for them.

From all the above, I find myself some hope for this crazy world we live in. That things are not so bleak as they may seem at first. We see it throughout history of how people rise up again from misfortune as a phoenix rises from the ashes. The spirit of togetherness that arose from September 11, even if it was temporary, was very much a testament to my belief that there is something good even in a bad situation. This gives me hope that one day the world will be a better place.

The last bit where the sage said that he was acting according to the knowledge that God has given him inspires me. For now, let us all act according to the knowledge and insights that we have, hoping that our actions are right. Lastly, let us have patience for things that are beyond our knowledge. Perhaps one day, we will be given insights into it and so will understand it better.