Commemorating the Martyrdom

For those not well acquainted with the life and death of Imam Husain(a.s.), the commemoration of his martyrdom is seen as an emotional occassion - a cry of the heart for what is lost. It is this, but it is also much more than this.

It is a time when the fundamental tenets of Islam (those truths which are the very essence of the Qur'an) are remembered and re-affirmed. The events at Kerbala act as a focal point for primary Qur'anic principles. It is as if all the rays of truth shining forth from the Qur'an are collected and brought into sharp, precise focus at one place and one moment in history. And the lesson made so clear that none could doubt it. The Qur'an is a book which urges man to expand his vision beyond his immediate surroundings and past the confines of the narrow strip of time he inhabits. It presents a view of a world backed by a truth, a purpose. And like the rhythms and cadences which manifest themselves during its recitation, it presents history as a meaningful pattern unfolding against the background of time.

So the Qur'an is far more than a series of commandments, a list of what is halal and haram for mankind. Rather, it seeks out the root causes behind man's condition and lays out a pattern of life which will allow man to emerge from this condition and fulfill his potential.

In order to do this it seeks to cultivate an attitude within the heart and mind of man. This is an attitude which must become a part of the human personality to be truly effective. It is a condition of mind known as submission, or Islam.

But it is a submission which grows out of the awareness, the understanding, and the recognition of the Reality behind existence which the Qur'an sets forth.

This obedience to The Reality which underlies all Creation is not a passive servitude but an active movement, a never ending migration of man's nature and will in the direction of God. It does not arise out of an acceptance of the current state of affairs, for that would be "shirk" - a submission to the world.

No, this submission is based on a foundation of discipline and struggle and guided by an intellegence and knowledge that must go beyond the simple compilation of facts and observations if Islam is not to be lost in a quagmire of directionless traditions and fiqh. The Qur'an is a clue to the living pulse of history, not a mere recitation of ancient tales, and as such it requires of man a vital, energetic submission.

This is why the Qur'an refers to religion as an ascent - a process of becoming, rather than a state of being. This is why the Most Noble Messanger(S.A.W.) is ordered by God to rise up and

become active for the sake of mankind when he is told:

"O thou shrouded in thy mantle, Arise and Warn!" (Sura 74)

This is why prayer in Islam is not a passive meditation but a process full of movement. And finally, this is why Jihad (striving in the way of God) is a part of the very substance of Islam as a dynamic submission, a continuous struggle waged until "...man 'reaches his origin and the heights of spirituality' - meaning God and the full potential of man."

It is said of the Imams (Peace be upon them all) that their worth and high standing came because they had achieved an understanding of the Qur'an in both its inner and outer dimensions. They had attained the heights of spirituality, and accepted the heavy responsibility which God conferred on man when He made him His vicegerent on the earth.

So it was with Imam Husain(a.s.).

When Husain moved towards Kerbala he was carrying out the responsibility which his Islam (his submission) required. His journey towards Kerbala was a movement against the untruth of Yezid's rule. It was a movement designed to shatter the pattern of corruption which had manifested itself under the banner of Islam. And it was left to one man, with his family and a small band of followers to accomplish this. In an age when falsehood was in the ascendency, Husain came forward as a witness to the Truth.

This is the meaning of the word "shahid" or "martyr". A "shahid" is one who is present as a witness for truth and against falsehood. He is one who has actively carried his submission forward in life and fulfilled his duty even unto death.

By committing this act of absolute surrender to God he embodies within his action the true essence of pure Islam. By his death he brings the principles of Islam to life, and by his blood and the purity of his sacrifice all that is false and narrow stands convicted and condemned. So, the commemmoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husain ibn Ali is more than just a time of weeping for those who fell in Kerbala. It is a time for re-affirming the truth which rose up from the blood of the fallen.

In the Qur'an, the Prophet Ibrahim(A.S.) says:

"I have set my face to Him Who created the heavens and the earth, in all exclusivity. My prayer, my sacrifice, my life, and my death are for God, the Lord of the Worlds.... Of this I am commanded, and I am of those who surrender." (Qur'an 6:162)

Muslims who hold the painful memory of Kerbala in their hearts, affirm this attitude of submission with every beat of hand against chest, and with every repetition of the name of Husain.