Celebrating Diversity

After praising and glorifying Allah (SWT), invoking Him to shower His blessings upon the last and final messenger Muhammad (SAW), reciting few verses from the Qur’an, and making supplications, Ameer Mustapha began his sermon by reminding the congregation of the hostility that prevailed between people during the pre-Islamic time, also known as the time of jahiliyyah or ignorance. It was usual for people from different tribes to engage in disputes with each other on trivial matters, which eventually led to war against each other. The division that was inflicting such people was called asabiyyah (tribalism/fanaticism/bigotry) or what the Qur’an calls hamiyyat ul-jahiliyyah, the fanatical rage of the time of ignorance. This is depicted graphically in the Qur’an as follows: Those who rejected had put in their hearts the rage of the days of ignorance, then God sent down tranquility upon His messenger and the believers, and directed them to uphold the word of righteousness, and they were well entitled to it and worthy of it. And God is fully aware of all things (al-Fath, 48:26).

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) over fourteen centuries ago educated man about his nature. The tribes that used to shed blood and go to war against each other came to understand that asabiyyah is against the very nature and fitrah (natural disposition) of man. It is indeed the Satan who wishes to see people fight amongst each other and despise and hate each other. Islam explains to humanity the purpose of creation of man and the reason for the diversity in the races and cultures around us. This teaching began with the purpose of our creation. Allah (SWT) says in the Qur’an, I did not create the Jinn and the humans except to serve Me (adh-Dhariyat, 51:56). This is the real purpose of our creation. We cannot lose sight of the purpose of our creation because if we are mindful and conscious of it, everything else becomes easy and clear. Worshipping and serving Allah (SWT), which is the purpose of creation has to be fulfilled not only individually but also collectively.

Allah (SWT) elaborates the collective purpose of the human race—once in Surah al-Anbiya and again in Surah al-Mu’minun. Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me (al-Anbiya, 21:92). This community of yours is one and I am your Lord; so be mindful of Me (al-Mu’minun, 23:52). The generality of these ayahs makes us think of ‘community’ (ummah) to mean the human race. Therefore, to worship, obey and serve Allah (SWT) is the collective purpose of the human race. How can we celebrate the praise of Allah (SWT) and worship Him as we ought to worship Him if we cannot even understand the diversity of our creation? What calamity afflicted the human race when it ignored its collective purpose of life? The Qur’an answers this; But they have split their community into sects, each rejoicing in their own. (al-Mu’minun, 23:53). That is not what we were created for. People have divided themselves in sects on the basis of their religion, cast, creed, race, ethnicity, nationality, the tongue they speak and the color of their skin. These issues quite often become the yardstick for superiority and inferiority among people. Despite the success of Late Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1960’s to put an end to racism, which even cost him his life, discrimination as a matter of law has ended, but as a matter of fact, it still exists, particularly here in the United States of America.

Indeed it was not difficult for Allah (SWT) to create all humans into one race, but there was a purpose for creating them into different races. This is explained in Surah al-Hujurat as follows: People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware (al-Hujurat, 49:13). Allah (SWT) calls this diversity among the people to be one of His signs among many other signs. And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors; most surely there are signs in this for the learned (al-Rum, 30:22). These are signs for us to reflect upon. These are signs of Allah (SWT)’s great wisdom that reveals the purpose of this diversity in creation. The purpose of people being created in different races is to come to learn from each other, to know each other, to understand each other and to benefit from each other.

We are all children of the same one single parent, Adam and Hawwa. We are all brothers and sisters in humanity regardless even of the faith we profess. This is the basic principle of the social system in Islam—complete social equality. We can learn to celebrate this great diversity that Allah (SWT) has created among us by not ridiculing each other, detesting each other, hating each other and killing each other. We should be grateful to Allah (SWT) for having blessed us with this diversity. Islam came to unite people; not to divide them. As a matter of fact, the first thing that happened on the Prophet’s migration to Medina from Mecca was that the enmity between the
two feuding tribes of al-Aws and al-Khazraj came to an end. The Prophet (SAW) unified these two tribes to help them fulfill humanity’s greatest purpose—to serve Allah (SWT) and His Din. Allah (SWT) fostered brotherhood between them. Allah (SWT) mentions this phenomenon in the following Qur’anic verse: Hold fast to God’s rope all together; do not split into factions. Remember God’s favor to you; you were enemies and then He brought your hearts together and you became brothers by His grace; you were about to fall into a pit of Fire and He saved you from it— in this way God makes His revelations clear to you so that you may be rightly guided (Al-i-Imran, 3:103). Should we not take lessons from this great ayah that whosoever turns back to asabiyyah or jahiliyyah; his abode is hell fire.

The magical formula for bringing the hearts of the people together is to cling to the Book of Allah (SWT). According to the Prophet’s great companion, Abdullah Ibn Masood (R.A), the Book of Allah (SWT) is the Rope of Allah (SWT). According to a Hadith, the Prophet (SAW) explained that the Book of Allah (SWT) or the Rope of Allah (SWT) stretches from the heavens to the earth. One end of it is in the hands of Allah (SWT). The other end of it, here on the earth, should be in our hand. This implies that as long as we hold on to the Book of Allah (SWT), we are in His safe hands.

Let us see our own state of affairs here in the USA. Are we united or divided? The bitter truth is that we still seem to be holding on to the asabiyyah brought back from our diverse cultural backgrounds. The Muslims in North America, particularly in the Metro Detroit Area truly represent Islam in terms of diversity of nationalities, races, tongues, and cultural backgrounds. This is one observation that we can all attest to. There is another observation—an ugly observation. We can attest to this also. It is that these communities of the Muslim ummah, by and large, do not get along with one another as well as they should. We still have some elements of the asabiyyah embedded in us. We often take pride in our culture and race more than we do in our faith. It is unfortunate that the mosques rather than being known by their names are better known and identified by the race of people who frequently pray in them—a Pakistani Masjid, a Bengali Masjid, an Egyptian Masjid and so on. This is a sad situation. Those who follow the news and are updated on what is happening in the West should have reason to believe that the days ahead are going to be still more difficult. Are we ready for that? We need to come together by putting our petty differences aside. We have to have a strategy, an agenda. Our agenda is what Allah (SWT) has put for us. We don’t have to invent one. Among the clauses in this agenda is to come together and unite. The pre-requisite for achieving this is to have the Taqwa of Allah (SWT)—to be mindful and conscious of Allah (SWT). Let the cultural baggage of our homes be left back at home. What we learned back home was mainly culture, with some elements of Islam here and there.

There is nothing wrong in having difference of opinions. Even the differences among the madhahib (legal schools of thought) on peripheral issues should be respected because their differences are based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Why should there be any animosity against one another simply because one follows a particular madhhab? In fact, this diversity in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) is to be celebrated. It is to be remembered, however, that we have a higher and nobler purpose and that is, according to the Qur’an, to be a community that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong. Those who do this are the successful ones. When we embark upon this task ordained by the Qur’an and unify ourselves as one strong ummah, the enemies of Islam will think twice before attacking us or even disturbing us.

Towards the end of his sermon, Ameer Mustapha invoked Allah (SWT)’s blessings and prayed for His help to enable all Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations and duties and be united as one strong ummah.

End

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