

THE MERCIFULNESS OF THE MESSENGER OF GOD

Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din

MARTIN LINGS

The mercifulness of Sayyidunī Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم is affirmed in the Quranic verse: “We sent thee not save as a mercy to the worlds.” Another verse speaks of him as being a mercy unto those who believe, and in yet another verse he is expressly described as merciful – whence the name *Rahim* in the litany of his noble names. Moreover when Hadrat A’ishah was questioned about the Holy Prophet in after years, she answered: “His nature was like the Qur’an: and every chapter of the Holy Book, with only one single exception, begins with the *Basmalah* which contains the two names of mercy, *ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim*.”

It would be possible to enlarge on this characteristic of Sayyidunī r-Rasul by giving any number of illustrations of it. But for our talk the theme of his mercifulness was chosen above all because it enables us to dwell on a very important aspect of Islam which is concerned more with the roots of his mercy than with its earthly manifestations. This brings us to another of his names, *ash-Shafi*, the Intercessor (between God and man). It was on the authority of the knowledge implicit in this function that he was able to say: “God hath a hundred mercies, and one of them hath He sent down amongst jinn and men and cattle and beasts of prey. Thereby they are kind and merciful to one another, and thereby the wild creatures incline in tenderness unto their offspring. And ninety-nine mercies hath God reserved unto Himself, that therewith He may show mercy unto His slaves on the day of the Resurrection.”

Other names closely related to *ash-Shafi*, which are to be found in the litanies given in such books as *Dala’il al-Khayrat*, are *Miftah ar-Rahmah*, the Key of Mercy, and *Miftah al-Jannah*, the Key of Paradise. In a sense these two names are identical for there is no Paradise without Mercy and there is no Mercy – at least of the ninety-nine mercies – which does not result in Paradise. But it may be said: These are names which rightly belong to every God-sent Messenger, for there is not one of them who was not sent above all for the purpose of guiding souls to the Mercy of Paradise. That is true; but there is none the less something unique about our Prophet in this respect that gives him a very special entitlement to that name – a right which he shares with no one else. According to the Torah, Sayyiduna Idris and Sayyiduna Ilyas were taken directly from this life to Paradise. The same is true of Sayyiduna Isa and his Mother. But Sayyiduna Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم is alone in having been taken from this life to Paradise and in having been sent back again from Paradise to this life, to live with his people and to guide them on the basis of his direct experience of Paradise, that is, of the 99 Mercies of God. Here lies the very essence of his mercifulness.

From this essential level it can be seen that there is a close relationship between mercifulness and other seemingly unconnected characteristics of the Prophet, such as his

unfading youth and beauty. To be the ‘Key of Mercy’ means being of a paradisaical nature, and many things in the prophet’s life suggest that once the Mi’raj had taken place, Heaven refused to relinquish him altogether, and that it still clung to him after he had returned to earth. His sayings confirm this: we read for example in *Sahih al-Bukhari* that on one occasion he was seen to stretch out his hand as if to take something, and then he drew it back. When his companions questioned him about it he said: “I saw Paradise, and I reached out for a cluster of its grapes. If I had taken it, ye would have eaten of it as long as this world endureth.” To take another example, he said from his pulpit in the Mosque on the day when his last illness began: “I go before you and I am your witness. Your meeting with me is at the Pool, which I see from here, where now I stand.”

When we study his *Sirah* we cannot help noticing how many crucial moments in his life, and therefore in the history of the foundation of Islam, are directly dominated by his function of Mercy – how often at such moments it is the key of Mercy and of Paradise who acts and speaks.

One of these crucial moments was at the pledge of the second ‘Aqabah which led directly to the Hijra and to the establishment, in Medina, of the first Islamic state. When this immensely important transaction was about to be concluded, the men of Medina said to the Prophet, صلى الله عليه وسلم “What shall be ours, O Messenger of God, if we fulfill to thee our pledge?” “Paradise,” he said, and they said: “Stretch forth thy hand.” He did so, and they pledged their oaths. The pact was thus sealed with the word “Paradise,” and by the prophet as Key of Paradise

Let us take another event, politically less decisive but of incalculable spiritual significance – the battle of Uhud. The Prophet was wounded twice, once to the point of losing consciousness, but this and the fact that the battle was, militarily speaking, a defeat and not a victory, appear to have been for him as nothing compared with the happiness of being able to exercise with such amplitude the function that we are speaking of in virtue of which he was mediator between this world and the Next. When the tide of battle had turned against the Muslims and when the enemy were pressing in on all sides, for him it clearly meant above all that Heaven also was pressing in on all sides. “Know that Paradise is beneath the shadows of the swords.” The *Sirah* gives us an inescapable impression that for him Uhud was a day of great rejoicing, because it was, for so many of his followers, the day of their entry into paradise. Moreover, although as martyrs they had no need of his intercession, not one of them could have attained to martyrdom if it had not been for his guidance, so that even for them he must be considered as the key of Paradise.

Let us take another example where the circumstances are very different, but where the same dominant principle prevails. The effect of this principle is here unusual from an earthly point of view, for it seems natural that a lover should prefer to die before his beloved rather than suffer the grief of seeing her die. Yet the Holy Prophet’s expression of the opposite preference is at the same time, in all that it implies, one of the most eloquent declarations of love that the history of mankind has recorded.

It was on the already mentioned day when he began to feel the first symptoms of the illness which he knew would be fatal. This was not a day that belonged to Hadrat A'ishah, but wishing her to know that he was ill, he went to tell her and found that she also, like himself was suffering from a severe headache. On his entry she said: "O my head!" He looked at her searchingly, and feeling that her illness was not as his, he said: "Nay, but it is, 'O my head!'" Then he said: "I wished that it might be" – he meant her death – "whilst yet I was alive, that I might ask forgiveness for thee and invoke mercy upon thee and shroud thee and pray over thee and bury thee." Once again, it was the Key of Mercy and of paradise who spoke.

In conclusion let us remind ourselves that during the years of his mission, the Holy Prophet brought many men and women from disbelief to faith not only by the Revelation itself, and by arguments drawn from it, but also by his own person. He was himself, mysteriously, an incarnation of the transcendent realities of the Afterlife in which many had ceased to believe. He spoke to his contemporaries of Paradise, and his powers of persuasion were incalculably increased because he was, before their eyes, something of a living proof of the reality of Paradise, from which he had himself recently come and which still clung to him both in body and soul. Now the purpose of this Congress is to recall him to us, insofar as this is possible and by deliberately dwelling on the roots of his mercifulness, I have thereby dwelt on his paradisaic nature with a view to recalling the presence of a soul which, like Paradise itself, was woven of Mercy. This brings us to stress a fundamental and universal truth upon which Islam is especially insistent and that is that this world is not man's home – or rather, that man's home is Paradise. And the Prophet's belonging to Paradise enabled him – and can still enable him by God's grace – to convince men of the certainty of this truth.

Allah has said: "This lower life is but a diversion and a game; and verily the abode of the Hereafter, that, that is life, did they but know." (XXIX, 64); and the same teaching is reiterated again and again throughout the Holy Quran. We may quote also the saying of the Prophet (May peace be upon him): "Be in this world as a stranger or as a passerby." And he likewise said: "What have I to do with this world? Verily I and this world are as a rider and a tree beneath which he taketh shelter. Then he goeth on his way, and leaveth it behind him."

These sayings must not be taken to imply that this world is to be neglected. Islam does not admit of any scission between the sacred and the secular. But it is too often forgotten that this unity of purpose is not a license for dragging down the sacred to the level of the secular. On the contrary, the otherworldliness of the Prophet is an implacable reminder that the secular must be drawn up in the direction of the sacred. All worldly acts must be spiritualized, that is, they must be performed with a view to the next life, in the certainty that only the Hereafter is of lasting value. That is why our acts must be *bismi Llahi ar-Rahmani ar-Rahim*, or they must not be at all, which brings us back to our main theme, for the formula of consecration, the *Basmalah*, is itself winged for Paradise with its two Names of Mercy, *ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim*.

At the Congress for which this theme was chosen, we were asked to make our talks especially relevant to the modern world and I could certainly claim that what I have said so far is no less relevant to our times than it is to any other period of Islamic history. It has however a particular significance for the present day – a significance which will become more apparent if we consider that most of the troubles of our age spring, directly or indirectly, from lack of faith, or weakness of faith, and from the consequent neglect of principles which depend upon faith for their maintenance. But even when faith seems to be lost, something of it remains in a form which does not at first sight seem to be connected with religion. I am referring to a need which is an essential part of man's nature, but which is liable to be lost sight of in later years, though it is normally apparent in children who are in some respects wiser than their elders. A little child will not willingly accept a story which does not end with the words: "And they lived happily ever afterwards." Adults respect this need in their children, but they smile at it and say that it is unrealistic. But in truth it is the children who are more realistic than their parents; for God has rooted deeply, in every human soul, the imperative desire for perfect happiness that will never end; and the existence of this desire is a proof – not logical, but intellectual or metaphysical – that man was originally made for Paradise, as all religions teach. In other words, Divine Providence has, as it were, built into man's soul a faith-basis which he cannot lose and which, even if it is not recognized as such, is perpetually within reach. It is always possible for man to retrieve a partially lost faith by meditating upon the vast dimensions of his own faculty of desire which can never be fully satisfied in this earthly life because it was made, precisely, to be adequate to nothing less than Paradise. Now any such meditation by man upon his own mysteriously transcendent appetite can be immeasurably helped by recalling that aspect of the Holy Prophet which we have dwelt on here, his fidelity to Paradise as man's one and only homeland, the fidelity in virtue of which he was "in this world as a stranger or as a passerby."

This fidelity to Paradise is, in a sense, Islam. For Islam is the religion of primordality, *din al fitrah*, and the primordality of man – that is, his first Adamic state – is Paradise. I close this paper with our greeting, which is the greeting of the people of Paradise: *as-Salamualaikum wa-Rahmatu-Llahi wa-Barakatu-Hu*.

(This talk was given at the International Seerat Conference in Islamabad in 1985, by al-Hajj Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din)

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