

Arafat — dedication, rejuvenation and a certain inner peace

A. W. HAMID

Barefooted on the sand, with arms outstretched and palms open in supplication, with emotions welling up within and making lumps in the throat and giving way to tears, the pilgrim stands on the plain of Arafat. He is one of a vast concourse of almost a million people, yet is very much alone—alone with his Creator, praising, thanking, repenting, reflecting, asking for guidance. For hours, from just after noon to sunset, with face turned towards the Qiblah, all the searchlights are turned within as fancies are laid bare and thoughts keep crowding in of one's frailty, inadequacy and utter dependence on the Creator. And as the sun sinks slowly beneath the horizon, lighting up the sky with a crimson glow, the emotions are too much to bear, the body trembles and a strange peace settles over the mind.

This is the day of Arafat, the fulfilment of a long yearning, the end of one road and hopefully the beginning of another—of rejuvenation, of dedication and a certain inner peace. And henceforth the words would ring out: *Labbayk Allahumma Labbayk, Labbayka laa sharika laka labbayk, innal hamda, wa'n ni'amata laka wa-l mulk, laa shareeka laka.* "Here I am, O Lord, Here I am. Here I am. There is no partner to You. Here I am. The praise and the bounty belong to You and the kingdom. There is no partner to You." This refrain has echoed down the centuries on the lips of pilgrims and fills the dusty air with its simplicity, power and beauty.

The day of Arafat well-spent, is a day which any Muslim who has experienced it would always cherish and long to recapture. In the plain of Arafat, tears are shed, errors erased, sins washed out and faults redressed for those who ask the Lord for forgiveness and offer sincere repentance. Happy is the person who receives the Mercy and Pleasure of God on this unique day, for the Muslim knows that this is a courtyard of clemency of the Great and Merciful Lord and Creator.

And what a unique day is Arafat! For the rest of the year the plain is barren and bare. Then suddenly on this one day the ninth of the month of Dhul Hijja, it springs to life with a sea of tents and a crowd of a million people all with one purpose in mind. The Mountain of Mercy which stands in the background is grey and rugged but on this one day it is dotted with samples of mankind from all over the globe following in the footsteps of their noble Prophet and bearing testimony to the momentous message which he transmitted to the world. It is on this mount that the Prophet stood facing the Qibla with his camel at his side and prayed from just after noon to sunset in this setting of simplicity and grandeur which has changed but little since then. Just before this he had delivered his memorable *khutbah* which came to be known as the Farewell Sermon. This sermon is still as fresh and as direct

as when he, peace be upon him, gave it. He said in part:

"All praise is for God. We praise Him and seek His help and ask him for forgiveness and repent before Him. We seek His protection against the mischiefs of our hearts and our evil actions. Whomsoever God guides on the right path no one can lead him astray and whomsoever God does not give guidance no one can guide him aright.

And I declare this truth that there is no god except Allah and I declare this truth that Muhammad is His servant and His Apostle. O servants of God, I advise you to worship Him and I admonish you to do so . . . After this, I tell you O people! Listen to me carefully as I speak clearly, for I do not think I will have the opportunity to meet you here after this year. . . .

Bear witness that I have conveyed the message to you. O God! Be our Witness. . . .

I am leaving with you two things which so long as you follow them, you will never go astray—one is the Book of Allah and the other is my Example. . . .

O people! Your God is One, and your ancestor is also one. You are all the progeny of Adam who was created from earth. The most respected before God amongst you is the one who is the most God-fearing. No Arab has preference over a non-Arab or a non-Arab over an Arab. Preference if any is on the basis of the fear of God. . . .

And you people will be asked about me. Now tell me what will you say. (And all cried out: We affirm that you have conveyed the message, carried out the responsibility of instructing the people, raised all curtains from the face of truth and faithfully conveyed the trust of God.)

O God! Be Thou the Witness! O God, Be Thou the Witness! O God, Be Thou the Witness! . . . God's protection and blessings descend on you".

The multitudes in Arafat year after year is a constant affirmation that Muhammad had delivered his message and conveyed the trust placed upon him by God. Someone has remarked that it is only the power of spiritual motivation which can move this vast multitude from one place to the next—from Mina to Arafat to Muzdalifah and back to Mina—in a very short space of twenty-four hours and that the task would be a nightmare for any commanding officer of an army.

Yet many of the rites of the Hajj date not from Muhammad but from the Prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, who on God's command bult the Sacred Ka'aba in Mecca for the worship of God. And God commanded him: "And to mankind proclaim the Hajj and they will come to

you in multitudes, and on every lean animal they would come from every deep ravine to witness the benefits which have been bestowed on them." The circumambulation of the Ka'aba, the drinking from the well of Zam Zam, the sacrificing of a sheep or cow or camel and other rites of the Hajj all go back to times before Prophet Muhammad. Performing them gives the pilgrim a strong sense of history, of belonging to a rich and valuable past stretching back to Adam, as the Prophet emphasised in his Farewell Sermon. This sense of oneness and of continuity pervades the entire pilgrimage. But then there is the perpetual paradox of feeling attached to a great cosmic world and at the same time having the certain knowledge that one is alone, is alone responsible for his actions and alone will be made to give account without any intercessor. This paradox never comes more sharply into focus than at the time of Hajj. A welter of emotions are produced when contemplating this paradox—some supremely comforting, some mystifying but all bearing testimony to the uniqueness and greatness of the occasion of Hajj. Indeed one would be at a loss if there was no way to follow and no precedent to adopt. But happily for the pilgrim, some of these mystifying thoughts are dispelled by prayer, prayers which were uttered by the prophets and others as well. Such a prayer was uttered by Ibn Abbas, a companion of the Prophet who prayed thus when making the last circumambulation of the Ka'aba:

"O my Lord! here I am before Thee, I am Thy servant, the son of Thy servant and maid servant. Thou made me bear what has been destined for me as a creature and made me travel in Thine territory until by Thy Grace and Favour I reached Thine House and helped me in performing my duty. My Lord! I have won Thine satisfaction, please make it greater and if not kindly be pleased with me now before my home gets much farther from Thy House as this is the time for my departure if Thou so permit; nor Have I any substitute for Thee or for Thine House. Thou art the Greatest and I have no better hope than Thee and Thine House.

O my Lord! give me a good health and a sound body and immunity in keeping up my religion; guard my soul against evil; bestow upon me discipline and obedience; and grant me good in this world and good in the Hereafter. Thou art Able to do all things."

It is through prayers like these that Hajj raises one to the level of a conscious being and the realisation dawns that man is a finite being needing guidance, forgiveness and succour.