

M A G N A N I M I T Y

THE NOBLEST VIRTUE

In the course of conversation over a dinner table, a host once asked his guests this question, "What quality in human character do you consider the most admirable of all?"

"Tolerance towards another's view point without smugness regarding one's own" came one reply. Another, "Giving of one's self or means with no thought of reward or recognition". Still another reply, "Refusal to judge another's actions or motives without first knowing what lies behind them", then "Forgiving wrongs done us, with no thought of recrimination".

Almost all these answers were naming some aspects of that noblest and rarest of all human graces - magnanimity, writes Clarence Hall in Reader's Digest of January, 1976.

What is Magnanimity? Dictionary makers define magnanimity as "high-mindedness; superiority to petty resentment or jealousy; generous disregard of injuries."

Saint Basil writes "to be kind and gentle to the fallen is the mark of one who surpasses all men in magnanimity and kindness. Magnanimous response - approach is not easy when we feel sorely harmed by someone our first impulse is to strike back.

Magnanimous spirit is normally to be found among great men. In one of his statements towards the end of the last world war, Sir Winston Churchill, the then British Prime Minister, chose to make mention of this virtue in these words: "In war: resolution, in defeat: defiance, in victory: magnanimity, in peace: goodwill".

We read from history of how Arabia over 1400 years ago was ridden with dissensions, internal strife and tribal wars which

prolonged for years over petty matters, when the spirit of recrimination and retaliation among the Arabs was at its highest zenith. It was the superb character of the Prophet of Islam, his noble approach with kindness, his practical examples of forgiveness and magnanimity to one and all that brought about a revolutionary change in the outlook and character of the ever warring Arabs. He pardoned even those who pelted him with house refuse and dirt when he passed through the streets of Mecca.

That was the way a Jewish woman always used to disrespect the Prophet everytime he passed by her house. One day, she did not do so as she was bed-ridden with illness. The Prophet paid her a visit not for any recrimination but to enquire about her health. This gesture came as a surprise and melted her heart so much that she converted to Islam on the spot in presence of the Prophet.

The Quraish and pagans of Mecca had tortured and oppressed the Prophet and his followers so much that they were obliged to migrate to Medina. Repeated wars were waged and the Prophet had to undergo considerable hardships in defence. Finally, in 8 A.H., the Prophet returned to Mecca victorious. The Quraish were extremely apprehensive of what was going to happen to them. In a short sentence, the Prophet magnanimously declared to his ardent enemies just conquered, "I shall speak to you as Joseph spoke unto his brothers, "There is no reproach against you today, God will forgive. He is the Most Merciful and Compassionate" (The Holy Prophet p.111) Thus he abolished the age-old customs of revenge and shedding of blood. There was no penalty, no martial law. What a splendid example of magnanimity.

Similarly, the members of the household of the Prophet and his rightful vicegerents upheld this noble practice. Islamic history has recorded many outstanding incidents, one of which had occurred during the year 64 A.H. Yezid, the well-known Omayyad

tyrant had just died. On hearing this news, Heseen s/o Nameer, a once prominent commander of Yezidi army at Karbala, fled from Mecca to Medina in anticipation of better security there due to the presence of the Omayyad army. On the way he and his followers were beset with extreme hunger and thirst. In absence of food and water, they almost lost hope of reaching Medina safely.

Compelled to break journey at a station, Haseen went out at night in search for water.

Suddenly, he saw a person on a camel laden with bags of water and foodstuffs coming from the opposite direction. He saluted and pleaded to the camel-driver to sell to him whatever food and water he had. An instant reply came from him, "They are not for sale but you could have them, if you need, without any price". Haseen was startled to hear the tone of the reply and thought it was not that of an ordinary Arab. On inquiry as to who ~~it~~ he was, the reply came "I am the son of Husain, Ali Ibnul Husain Zainul-Abedeem". "And do you know me?" he asked. "Yes. You are Haseen the son of Nameer". It was Haseen who had waged a fierce attack of arrows at Kerbala resulting into the killing of several companions of Imam Husein.

Imam Zainul Abedeem came down his camel and entrusted the whole camel laden with food and water to him. Haseen exhorted the Imam to claim Caliphate in place of Yezid and he promised his full support with his large army. But the Imam refused the offer and said, "I have taken oath that I shall neither accept allegiance nor extend my hand of allegiance to anyone." So saying, the Imam returned to Medina on his camel after delivering the full load of food and water to the arch enemy of his family. (Jawahirul Bayan)

After the heart-rending tragedy of Kerbala, one would not expect such an act of magnanimity and kind help to one's staunch enemy. But members of the noble house of the Prophet had always acted so and had never withheld assistance to their foes even in the middle of a fierce battle. After all, they were the true

interpreters of the Holy Qur'an and those who had put its teachings into full practice. The Holy Qur'an eulogises those who practice magnanimity in these words:

"And those who are constant, seeking the pleasure of their Lord, and keep up prayer and spend (benevolently) out of what We have given them secretly and openly and repel evil with good; as for those they shall have the (hasty) issue of the bode" (Sura Ra'd - verse 22).