

The Paradise Seekers

One of the starkest truths to emerge from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, although not yet realised by the Israeli government, is the inability of even a vastly superior military force to defend its people against a fanatical opposition. Rather than defeating its enemies, it only breeds further militancy and a willingness to go to more extreme lengths. With a minimum of weaponry and a maximum of blind fanaticism, a devastating blow can be struck out of all proportion to the number of perpetrators involved. Deprived of participating in a civilised society themselves, feelings of desperation and hatred have become so strong in sections of the Palestinian people, that a door has been opened to the evil thoughtform of religious fundamentalism that is stalking the world. The suicide killer has thus emerged as a terrifying feature of twenty-first century life.

Even women and children are falling under the spell of this malicious thoughtform, prompting them to sacrifice their lives to a cause they believe to be in line with the wishes of Allah. This sacrifice is prompted by the belief that paradise awaits them in the next world as a reward for murdering those they consider to be the enemies of God in this one. As they consider themselves departing to a far more gratifying life than the one they are leaving, no real conscious sacrifice has therefore been made. Nor is it an act of sacrifice in the deeper meaning of the word, which is the impulse of giving for the whole, not for oneself or any separated part of it. This latter definition is the underlying truth that all of God's messengers have brought to humanity, but such is the blindness and the contaminating influence of the lower separative mind, that this divine law of sacrifice is wielded with the selfish intent of salvation of the perpetrator and those who are part of his cause. We have seen this principle at work before in the idea of 'chosen races', each convinced that in the next life they alone are to receive a special place excluding different faiths and/or cultures. The idea of selective salvation is to be found in both Jewish and Christian dogma as well as Muslim, but it is clear that this type of exclusiveness has lost sight of the core of religious teaching – the unifying principle of Love.

As for paradise, surely it cannot be for the chosen few alone, for true happiness comes through a sense of connectedness to the whole; and any part of the whole that isn't present immediately makes this completeness impossible. If God created everything, then His divine Plan must surely include the whole of His creation. Interestingly, the root of the word "paradise" can be traced back to ancient Persian and the idea of an 'enclosed place'; only later did Greek scholars change the word to mean an 'enclosed park' giving a Biblical connection to the 'garden of Eden'. While the concept of an enclosed place can be associated with the idea of peace and security, which people on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian divide long for, it is also suggestive of separation and restriction, which cannot logically exist in any exalted spiritual state. Perhaps though the yearning for such an exclusive place is understandable in those who have been excluded themselves. For them, there must be some kind of vision that provides hope and the possibility of a better future, sometime, someplace, no matter how distant. And so there is the growing susceptibility to anyone who seems to promise this vision, such as those charismatic leaders whose inclinations towards separateness have made them agents of dark forces. Their tremendous influence acts upon the frustrations of others empowering and expanding the thoughtform of religious fundamentalism, so intensifying and perpetuating the wretchedness of the situation.

Regrettably, the exclusiveness of this doctrine finds an echo in some strands of Jewish fundamentalism, in the notion that it is only when the Jewish people are resident in all of the historical Israel that the Messiah will come, and the world will be redeemed. This can lead to the physical exclusion of Palestinians from their land by Jewish settlers. Although this is not the motive of all settlers, it gives some of them a special intransigence in their dealings both with Palestinians and with their own government, as was witnessed recently in the defeat of Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan.

How then to break this spiral of conflict? It is only through the united voice of the Palestinian and Israeli people as a whole that a commonsense non-extreme solution can be found. Unfortunately though, it is extremism that seems to be the main focus of media coverage, and this serves to engender more fear, impeding those constructive interchanges that are so necessary for peace building. It is also sadly true that the Palestinians are not helping the situation in the way they express their anger in such an hysterical manner. The Israelis also express anger equally inappropriately such as in the destruction of the houses of suspected terrorists. However, anger vented through uncontrolled emotion seems to evoke a powerful instinctual reaction in many who would otherwise be natural sympathisers, touching base instincts that lie deeply rooted in all of us and which can all too easily rise into prominence and threaten the type of 'civilised' lifestyles we all desire.

In connection with this, Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian scholar and activist who is committed to non-violence in both methods and goals of struggle, acknowledges that Israelis often appear to win the moral battle, He gives an example of a Jewish funeral with images of people mourning solemnly and civilly, which engages the sympathy of the viewer. By contrast he says that when a murdered Palestinian is buried, TV pictures are broadcast of enraged people shouting and shooting. "Even I, think to myself that they are terrifying", he said. Mr Nusseibeh goes on to say that this behaviour of the Palestinians is partly attributed to being militarily weak, deprived of civilised life and having to compensate for this inferiority with aggressive rhetoric. This loud 'voice' has also led to Palestinians being seen as extremists, "*always trying to express a moral statement and not knowing how to do it,*" he says. For a people trying to co-exist with Israel, it is not in the interest of Palestinians to continue to reinforce fear. "Always", he states, "when one side holds absolute supremacy in military terms, the strength of the other side rests, seemingly paradoxically, in its military inferiority. Successful resistance to military oppression can only be non-military. When protest is only a military one it excludes the rest of the population, and the source of power is lost."

We are reminded here of the non-violent protests inaugurated by Martin Luther King and how different was the nature of his sacrifice. King rose above instinctual human reactions to oppression to lead the civil rights protests in the 1960's. These were remarkable for the atmosphere of civility in which they were conducted, standing out in stark contrast to the brutality of many of the segregationists, and winning the support of the hearts and minds of people worldwide in the process. The day before his assassination and in response to threats to his life he spoke of seeing the Promised Land. He acknowledged that longevity has its place but said he was not concerned about that at the time. Part of his speech has become immortalised in the words: "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land". King never sought his own death but he did know that there are principles, rights and values worth fighting for to the very end because they carry the essence of life itself. This is true sacrifice, the manner in which the fight is carried out being more important than the immediate results.

This flame of sacrifice, in the sense of "giving for the whole", is carried forward by those who have worked so assiduously to formulate peace initiatives such as the Geneva Accord. They demonstrate the spirit of compromise knowing that each must make sacrifices by letting go of some of their past identity in order to build a shared vision for the future. As supporters of this will-infused process, we continue to breathe our vitality into the Geneva initiative through our group visualisations and reflections.

Headquarters Group
Cycle of Conferences

NB. Please be sure to keep checking our weblog at <http://lucis.typepad.com> which contains recent journalism and comment on the Geneva Accord from around the Internet.