

# Bilal, the first muezzin

## A Muslim story

**Key ideas: Islam, courage, the call to prayer**

**M**any years ago, in Mecca, there lived a slave called Bilal. Bilal's master was a hard, cruel man called Umayya. He was wealthy and powerful and demanded that all his slaves worship like him. Now, Umayya worshipped many idols.

One day, Umayya called Bilal, gave him a whip, and ordered him to beat another slave. 'He says there is only one God,' said Umayya, 'and that every person is important. The whip will teach him a lesson.' However, the sight of the whip did not frighten the slave. Endlessly he called out, 'One God, only one God.' His courage brought Bilal to believe also. He could not whip such a man.

Umayya was angry. Not only had Bilal disobeyed him but now he too stood in the courtyard shouting, 'One God, only one God.' Soon all the slaves would revolt. Bilal must be taught a lesson. Umayya ordered that his hands and feet be tied. Then Bilal was dragged outside the city wall to lie, without shelter, on the sands under the scorching sun. But all the time he shouted, 'One God, only one God.'

The shouting vexed Umayya. 'Find a great, heavy rock,' he ordered. 'Place it on his chest. That will quieten him.' It did. Under the weight of the rock Bilal could hardly breathe. But still through dry, cracked lips he whispered, 'One God, only one God.'

Now it happened that Abu Bakr, a follower of the Prophet, was passing by. Shocked, he went to Umayya to ask how anyone could treat another in that way. 'He is my slave, I'll do what I like with him,' said Umayya. 'If you do not like it, you can always buy him.' So Abu Bakr bought Bilal and he, too, became a follower of the Prophet.

Bilal and the others decided to build a place where they could worship God. When it was finished they had to decide on the best way to call the people to prayer. Should they use a bell or a drum, a horn or maybe even a trumpet? But they could not agree. Then Abdullah, another of the Prophet's followers spoke about a dream he had, in which he heard a man's voice calling the people to prayer. All agreed this was a fine solution - just the human voice on its own. But who was to have this honour?

The Prophet placed his arm around Bilal's shoulder. 'Yours shall be the voice, Bilal,' he said, 'the voice that praised God even from under a rock.' 'But what am I to call?' said Bilal. 'I don't know what to say.' 'Praise God, tell the people Muhammad is his messenger and call them to prayer. That will be sufficient,' answered the Prophet.

Bilal raced up the top of the mud roof of the mosque. He stood still, staring at the people down below. Then he threw back his head, raised his voice, and from deep inside him came the words that still echo, five times a day, in the towns and villages of Islam:

'Allahu Akbar, God is most Great. I witness that there is no God but Allah. I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Come to prayer. Come to salvation.'