

In Quarantine

By *M. Ali Lakhani*

‘...it may well be that you hate a thing the while it is good for you,
and it may well be that you love a thing the while it is bad for you:
and God knows, whereas you do not know.’

Koran, Al-Baqarab, 2:216

Lent has fallen this year at a time when the world is beset by a deadly pandemic and is forced into quarantine. The term ‘quarantine’ originated in medieval times when it was felt necessary to isolate those infected with contagion. Etymologically, it meant ‘a period of 40 days’ and came to be associated with both a period of seclusion and of healing. Lent traditionally lasts for 40 days (not counting the Sabbaths). It commences on Ash Wednesday (marking the beginning of Lenten austerity, when penitent man is mindful of his creaturehood, signified by ashes) and ends on Easter Sunday (marking for Christians the Resurrection - the promise that, as *Imago Dei*, man is destined to transcend the frailties of the human condition). It is a time of inwardness and humility, of repentance (for the sins of forgetfulness and excess) and purification. The 40 days period also evokes for Christians the time spent by Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism - a time of testing and the confirmation of faith - and the period between Resurrection and Ascension - denoting spiritual rebirth and sublimation.

For Jews, Pesach or Passover, which coincides with Lent (both are calculated by reference to the Paschal moon and coincide with the renewal of springtime) similarly recalls a time of trial and spiritual renewal. It refers to the story in the Book of Exodus when a series of severe plagues were brought down on the Egyptians, oppressors of the Israelites, whom God spared from the scourges by virtue of their faith. But on their release from bondage, many of the Israelites strayed from their faith and the community was cast into the wilderness for 40 years, a symbolic exilic period preceding their entry into the Promised Land. This episode, like many others in the scriptures (for example, the

40 days of the Flood, the 40 days of Noah's waiting for the waters to recede, and the period of Moses' sojourn on Mount Sinai), associates the significance of the number 40 with the divine testing of man, a period when man is offered the opportunity to cultivate the qualities required to gain entry into the divine sanctum.

The number 40 also denotes the symbolic age of spiritual maturity, when one reorients oneself from the mind to the Heart, from mundane concerns to inwardness. For example, in Judaism, the rabbinical student must be at least 40 before he is permitted to study Kabbalah. Significantly, the Prophet of Islam was the age of 40 when he received the first revelation from Archangel Gabriel – this, while being in a state of outer seclusion (denoted by the Cave of Hira) and inner purification (denoted by Muhammad being *Ummi*, literally 'the unlettered one', understood esoterically as 'the pure one').

In spiritual terms, therefore, the period of a quarantine is a time to turn away from the adornments and distractions of this world and to reflect on one's spiritual condition. It forces us to be 'out of the swing of the sea', to confront ourselves and take stock of our inner life and its relation to our everyday existence. In this sense, a quarantine serves the same purpose as a spiritual retreat (like a Sufi *khalwa* or the cenobitic or contemplative retreats in many faith traditions). And for Muslims, the period of the current quarantine significantly coincides with the three holiest months in the Islamic calendar, culminating in Ramadan, which are associated with inwardness and renewal.

From this vantage, one sees how, in the midst of the universal seclusion brought on by the current pandemic, a new awareness is dawning. The earth is beginning to heal. The signs are evident. Air pollution is declining. Forests are breathing cleaner air. Flowers are blooming, bees are thriving. Water is becoming purer. Creatures of land and sea are prospering in the wake of Man's (albeit temporary) retreat. In the face of human and ecological fragility, relationships and priorities are beginning to be re-evaluated. More importantly, Man is being given an opportunity to consider whether he will conform to a higher order or will seek instead to impose himself on the natural world; whether he will recognize his interdependence with the sacred web of life and act as his 'brother's keeper' or choose to be governed only by self-interest and self-will; whether he will seek the 'norm' within his primordial nature

or instead in his own grasping powers. One can either have faith in the transcendent order integrated with nature or else believe simply in a material order that one seeks to control. This pandemic is reminding us that we and this world are part of a greater order of being. In the words of Frithjof Schuon,

The error is to believe that the causes which determine human history or which carry it to its conclusion belong to the same order as our matter or our "natural" laws, whereas in fact the whole visible cosmos is resting upon an invisible volcano - but also, at a deeper ontological level, upon a formless ocean of bliss.¹

The period of our quarantine is a time to contemplate these things, to reflect on 'the sweet uses of adversity'² and to accept the wisdom of the divine allopathy while continuing to fight the virus. It is a time to affirm our faith in Light and in Life. In the words of Her Majesty the Queen,

Coronavirus will not overcome us. As dark as death can be - particularly for those suffering with grief - light and life are greater.³

Light: in the goodness of the many around us, in the beauty that surrounds us, and in ourselves.

Life: in the knowledge that the waters which drowned the iniquitous were the very same waters which bore the Ark.

¹ Schuon, F., from *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, (World Wisdom, 2005) p. 505.

² Shakespeare: "Sweet are the uses of adversity/ Which like the toad, ugly and venomous/ Wears yet a precious jewel in its head." (*As You Like It*, II.i.12)

³ HM Queen Elizabeth II, Easter Address, April 11, 2020.