

SERMON AND REPORT AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF PARISHIONERS 27/2/20222:

GEOFF CHADWICK: EXODUS 34.29-35

Transfiguration

I've been thinking about masks.

I've had to wear one at school.

I have to wear one in the shops,

I have to wear one at church.

And Moses said: "I have to wear one because I've seen God!"

Really? you might say. But here it is in the text:

³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him (Ex 34:33-35, NRSV)

Mask wearing; it seems it's not a new fangled thing after all!

So what's this veil wearing all about?

It's all to do with the word "shone" In Hebrew the word for shone is: *qaran* meaning to send out rays of light.

(Strong's Hebrew: 7160. קָרַן (qaran) -- to send out rays)

Here the rays of light are a hint of God's presence. As you would be aware, there are many references to God as light. God's presence is God's brightness. Moses, who had been in the company of that brightness, has a little of this brightness "rub off" on him. Moses, beaming with God's reflected glory, is too terrifying, or too iridescent to look at. A veil is needed.

So what about us?

Are our veils (masks) hiding our glory. Do we have "metaphorical masks" that hide our glory? Are we afraid of being God's "bright sparks"? Are we afraid to shine? The other day one of my Y12 students served me from behind a shop counter. Embarrassingly I did not recognize her behind her mask. As she was serving me, I had an uncanny feeling she was grinning – behind her mask- not just because it was me – but because I was befuddled in recognizing her. It wasn't until she spoke that I knew who she was by the sound of her voice.

Stumbling a little, I said: "*Oh forgive me, I didn't recognize you in disguise.*" The store manager was next to her and asked if I knew her. "*Of course*", I said, "*She's one of our bright sparks!*". These words fell out of my mouth before I realised what I was saying. At that point I could see a faint, red tinge of embarrassment glowing from behind the student's mask..

"*Oh dear*", I thought, "*Now I really have embarrassed her*".

But you know, she really is a bright spark! In fact, we all are, one way or another. We are all laden with a good dose of God's glory. From our making we are called to shine. Maybe you're not so sure about that, but let's try something.

Turn to the person next to you and say (with meaning!): "*Hello you bright spark of God's glory.*"

How did that make you feel?

So, do we hide our bright sparks? Are we so terrified of our abilities that we would keep them behind our mask? On the other hand, I wonder if we are too embarrassed to tell someone that we seek God's bright spark in them?

In the *Phantom of the Opera* there is a famous song sung during a Masquerade party at the beginning Act 2:

*Masquerade! Paper faces on parade
Masquerade! Hide your face so the world will never find you
Masquerade! Every face a different shade
Masquerade! Look around, there's another mask behind you*

(From:

<https://www.lyrics.com/track/2429850/Andrew+Lloyd+Webber/Masquerade+%5BFrom+The+Phantom+of+the+Opera%5D>)

Is life a masquerade? Do we want to hide?

Well, I think the answer is both "Yes" and "No"?

If we live our lives without masking anything, then we would be in danger of inappropriate self-disclosure. If we live with no boundary between our public and private lives, then we lack confidentiality. I suggest there are some things that only God needs to know and certainly not Social media!

Meanwhile, to hide behind an impenetrable mask of self-protection is to deny intimacy. This, of course is a bi-product of unchecked individuality.

There is a balance somewhere – perhaps our masks should be translucent – shiny, but not too bright. Revealing but not too much.

So far I've been talking about individuals, but I think we can argue a similar case for the church. We have a lovely little parish here – and I mean that, but somehow I think we are hidden away from view. The brightness of God's radiance is not so obvious to those on our fringes. I suspect we need to lift our profile, not just because we want members, but because we want others to see God's radiance beaming from us. We do believe that God makes a positive difference to life and we do hope that the church carries that message. Yet as Anglicans, I think we can be

shy about our faith. In a sense, we grin behind our masks – we want to share our faith but we don't want to come over "all religious". We want to shine but worry that we might terrify people. Getting this right is tricky; especially in our religion caution society, but it seems to me that we need to grin a little more brightly behind our reticent masks. This, I think, is our current challenge; to shine with God's goodness but not so brightly that we terrify the seekers.

I conclude with a prayer I once heard John Shepherd pray before he became the Dean of St George's Cathedral and the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative in Rome. The context was a chapel service amongst university students. Of all the prayers I've heard in my life, this one has stuck with me. Maybe it says something about me but I hope it speaks to you as well.

Lord, I want to love you, yet I'm not sure.
I want to trust you, yet I'm afraid of being taken in.
I know I need you, yet I'm ashamed of the need.
I want to pray, yet I'm afraid of being a hypocrite.
I need my independence, yet I fear to be alone.
I want to belong, yet I must be myself.
Take me, Lord, yet leave me alone.
Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.
O Lord, if you are there, you do understand, don't you?
Give me what I need but leave me free to choose.
Help me work it out my own way, but don't let me go.
Let me understand myself, but don't let me despair.
Come unto me, O Lord...I want you there.
Lighten my darkness...but don't dazzle me.
Help me to see what I need to do and give me strength to do it. O Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.

Bernard, SSF, 1928-2007

(From: Appleton George, 1998, The Oxford Book of Prayer, Oxford University Press, New York.)