

Salford Methodist Circuit



God Unmasked - 13th September 2020

Rev Clare Stainsby

Good morning everyone. Good to be with you, even if I can't see you. Even if you can't hear me.

But I guess you'd prefer it if you could hear what I'm saying this morning so good morning everyone. Good to be with you, even if I can't see you. I'm sure many of you are wearing one of these at various points during your week. It's another part of the ritual of venturing out into the world that we just can't avoid at present. I don't find it a particularly pleasant experience, I'm sure you don't either.

I thought I'd explore something of the purpose of masks this morning. Not just the disposable, or fabric variety that we are being required to wear, but masks that we wear for other reasons, and how that relates to our relationship with God.

First let's offer our praise in our opening hymn:

Hymn: Immortal, invisible, God only wise

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou
rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all life Thou givest, to both great and small; in all life Thou livest, the
true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish; but naught changeth Thee.*

*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore Thee, all
veiling their sight;
All laud we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee.*

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

Let us pray

Salford Methodist Circuit



We bring our praise to you, immortal, invisible, most blessed, most glorious, almighty God. We worship you because of who you are; Creator of life. The source of purpose in living; the sustainer of all you have created through your Holy Spirit. And the lover of your world and all that is in it.

We bring our praise to you, Lord of righteousness and justice. We worship you because of what you have done. You did not create and then stand back to watch your creation struggle. You are with us in all our struggles, and you chose to live among us and experience the human struggle for yourself. We praise and thank you for your redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

We bring our praise to you, ever loving God. We worship you for all that you have given us. We do not stand alone, but together as members of your family, as part of your world-wide church community. We praise you because you became accessible to us through Jesus, and that through His Spirit we can have fellowship with each other and with you.

We confess that in our lives we so often try to extinguish your light, though our weaknesses, our impatience, our neglect of you and of other people, our selfishness, our failure to put you at the heart of everything or to recognise your hand in our lives.

We thank you that through your Son we do not need to live weighed down by guilt but that through your love you are reaching out to each one of us with your forgiveness.

God of light, God of hope, God of love, we bring all our prayers to you. Speak to us today as we worship you.

And we share together in the prayer Jesus taught us.

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.*

So what are these masks that we're all wearing all about? The government has told us that we have to wear them, and that includes wearing them inside our church buildings when they are open for worship eventually. The government also tell us that the masks are more about the protection of others than the protection of ourselves. So that if we are in the process of developing Covid-19 symptoms we won't easily spread them to others.



I can't say I'm a fan of wearing a mask - the experience is often quite unpleasant. However, I don't know about you, but I do feel a degree of personal protection when I'm wearing a mask, even if that's not their main purpose. Psychologically I feel somehow safe when I go into a shop or a place where other people are congregating. I think that masks through time have often been about giving the wearer a degree of protection. But they also have other purposes. Wikipedia tells me that "a mask is an object normally worn on the face, typically for protection, disguise, performance or entertainment."

Clearly there is no aspect of the masks that we are currently wearing that has anything to do with disguise, performance or entertainment. Though it's very easy to walk past someone you know because the mask hides the very features by which you normally recognise them.

So, let's hear a reading from the Old Testament now, in which the central person was someone whose very closest relatives failed to recognise him until the moment, when he chose to remove his mask, so to speak, and reveal his true identity. We're going to hear two passages, several chapters, and several years apart, as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and then as he meets with them again after the death of his father.

Reading: Genesis 45 : 1 - 8 & 14

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, 'Make everyone leave my presence!' So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still living?' But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 'So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards his brothers talked with him.

Genesis 50 : 15 - 21

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we



did to him?' So they sent word to Joseph, saying, 'Your father left these instructions before he died: "This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly." Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.' When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. 'We are your slaves,' they said.

But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph had been sold into slavery by his own brothers, who found him such an arrogant, insufferable, annoying youth that they could no longer stand having around them. Whatever they thought of him, that was a very drastic way of dealing with an annoying relative! Don't try it at home!

The story of Joseph is very familiar - as he made himself useful to others through his skill of interpreting dreams. This eventually led him to the highest role in the land of Egypt, as Pharaoh's second-in-command, with particular management over the way that food was stored and shared out during the years of famine - a famine identified as imminent by Joseph in his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. So in the first part of the reading we heard, Joseph was there with his brothers, but no doubt dressed for his role as a ruler in Egypt: a big contrast to the travelling clothes of his starving brothers. The brothers were there to beg for food, because their own land was in such turmoil through famine. They in no way recognised their brother through the mask of authority that he was wearing. They only saw someone who had the power of life and death over them, and they feared him greatly.

But Joseph was ready to remove his mask, and to reveal who he was. Actually in that moment removing the mask presented no danger what so ever to Joseph himself. He was still the person they saw before them - a man of enormous power and influence, who could throw them all into prison, or kill them, or send them back home to certain starvation. Joseph had nothing to fear now. When he was a boy, they had had tremendous power over him, but no longer. Joseph was keen to be recognised by his brothers, but not so that he could gloat over them, the way his fortunes had changed for the better while theirs had declined. He just wanted to be reunited with his family, and especially with his father.

In the later reading, the brothers were again fearful. Clearly, the power that Joseph wielded was still holding them apart. And now their father was dead. Joseph could, if he chose, wreak vengeance upon them for the way they treated him in the past. But Joseph had no thoughts of vengeance. His power was a mask that he wore as he fulfilled his responsibilities in Egypt, but he needed his



brothers to know that the past was the past - and he offered them the hand of forgiveness, and reassurance. He spoke to them with kindness.

That's just about the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers. The book of Genesis tells us he lived to the ripe old age of 110 and was buried in Egypt. The next book, Exodus, begins with a reminder of the names of Jacob's sons, and how their family dynasty grew and grew over the centuries, but also how their fortunes changed dramatically as they found themselves slaves. All part of the unfolding history of the children of Israel which is at the heart of the old Testament.

But think about Joseph for a moment. His mask of power is very real, and his right to judgement and anger are also clear. His brothers had treated him appallingly. But through his life Joseph has seen that God's plan for him and for his family is a constant thread. And so he is prepared to reach through his mask of power, not to gloat over those who had wronged him, but with absolute forgiveness. Those first moments of revealing himself to his brothers were highly emotional for him. In all his power and success, he was grateful for the opportunity to reunite with his family. Later, with his power still firmly intact, he reaches again through the mask he still wears to offer the brothers the kindness and forgiveness and acceptance - all that they need for their reassurance. I'm not sure whether that relationship with his brothers ever became really close. History and Genesis don't reveal any more details. But the relationship was restored.

Masks are about protection, but that protection is not just for the wearer of the mask, but also for the protection of others. Masks are about disguise, and performance, but sometimes masks can be lifted in order for the possibilities to flow in. Let's think about that further in a moment - now our second reading.

Reading: Philippians 2 : 1 - 11

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the

Salford Methodist Circuit



earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen

As we sang at the beginning of our service, God is invisible. No one has ever looked on the face of God. We believe that God exists, but we don't exactly experience God with our senses, not in a physical way. In a way, God is hidden behind a mask. It's a mask of power beyond anything we can imagine. It's a mask that conceals the extent of that power: God is ancient beyond our anything we can understand, and yet we believe living and present with us. It's a mask that conceals the expression on God's face. For centuries people understood God's expression to be one of sternness and judgement. God was to be appeased with blood sacrifices, and honoured with obedience. God was to be worshipped and respected, but also to be feared. Yet people also knew God through the things they could perceive through their own senses. They recognised God in creation, and in the turning of seasons; in the power of nature and in the wisdom of life. From time to time, someone felt a closer bond to God, that revealed more of God's nature and God's plan. Some of those people are known to us through the Bible - people like Abraham, Issac, Jacob and Joseph. People like Moses and Joshua and Gideon and Samson. Kings like Saul and David and Solomon. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Jonah. God spoke to these people, and through these people God spoke to others, revealing parts of the great plan that underpins all of creation. God still wore a mask, which protected people from all that power. But God's nature was revealed to be more kindly, and compassionate, more patient and understanding of human nature, more accepting, more loving. Yet still people turned from God, and doubted, and went their own way.

God wore a mask to protect people from the sheer strength of his power, but the time came for God to reveal his true nature. In order to do that, God's mask was removed, and God moved into this world in person, in the person of Jesus. Jesus was God unmasked. Jesus came with all the power of God but in human form, made utterly vulnerable. He moved among the people of this world, to reveal the face of God, and much more. Jesus revealed the sheer compassion of God, the wisdom and the vision, the ability and the desire to relate to people as individuals in all their needs, and the love at the heart of God. Jesus explained forgiveness in stories, and demonstrated it in his understanding of human weakness. Jesus modelled the purpose of God, and took that purpose to whole new lengths, through becoming the willing victim in the final sacrifice to free the human race from fear once and for all time. Through Jesus, through all he said and all he did, and through his death, God removed his mask.

The masks we wear currently are for protection - our protection and for the protection of other in particular. But what masks do we wear before one another? What do we hide of ourselves from the rest of the world. Do we wear masks that are our protection against what we believe the world might do to us

Salford Methodist Circuit



if they could see us as we really are? Do we wear masks to protect others from our true flawed nature? Do we wear masks to disguise the reality? Is the way we present ourselves to others sometimes and to some degree a performance? And is that a bad thing? Or is it just inevitable because we are human. I believe every single one of us wears a mask or two to hide things; or, at times, to make us feel safe and protected; or to create a persona that we believe is more acceptable than the reality of who we are.

Be very clear on one thing: God who willingly became unmasked in Jesus, is never fooled by any sort of mask we might wear. God sees right to the very heart of who we are, with all our mistakes and all our issues, the things we prefer to hide. God sees right through us, because God knows us completely through and through. Wonderfully, that knowing does not cause God to turn away from us or abandon us. In spite of who we are, or because of who we are, God loves us utterly unconditionally. No mask can keep that love for us. No disguise can make us more acceptable to God. We need no protection from God, and God needs no protection from us. We are who we are, and we are loved exactly as we are. I'm sure you've heard that lots of times before. But we need to hear it time and again. Because we are inclined to punish ourselves for the mistakes that we make, and attempt to put on those masks, telling ourselves, God won't love me after this. But that is never true. God knows you and loves you. You are accepted and forgiven every moment of every day. And God, unmasked in Christ, will always offer you a way back to the heart of his love.

Remember what Paul says in his letter to the Romans, Chapter 8:

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's sing now some words based on Psalm 139, which have exactly the same message - God sees right through our masks, and knows us utterly. And let's never forget that when God seems distant, or somehow masked to us, that in truth he unmasked himself in Jesus, and is always and forever available to us, and also forever accepting of us. Nothing can separate us ever from God and his love.

Hymn: 'O God, You Search Me And You Know Me.'

*O God you search me and you know me, all my thoughts lie open to your gaze,
When I walk or lie down you are before me, ever the maker and keeper of my days.*

*You know my resting and my rising, You discern my purpose from afar,
And with love everlasting you besiege me, in every moment of life and death you are.*

Salford Methodist Circuit



*Before a word is on my tongue, Lord, You have known its meaning
through and through,
You are with me beyond my understanding, God of my present, my past
and future too.*

*Although your Spirit is upon me, still I search for shelter from your light,
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you, even the darkness is radiant
in your sight.*

*For you created me and shaped me, gave me life within my mother's
womb,
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you: safe in your hands, all creation
is made new.*

Now our prayers, let us pray:

Lord, You come to me,
You touch me, You wipe away my tears,
You smile at me, You embrace me,
Your healing touch irons out my fears, Lord, I thank You.

Masked, I hide myself from this world.
Locked down, I feel apart from others.
But nothing can separate me from you.
Nothing stands between me and your love.
You are there, and you are listening to my thoughts and my prayers.

We bring you our prayers for this world in all its needs.
In quiet we name those needs that on our hearts.

[Silence]

We bring our prayers for your church, where ever it is, and how ever it finds
itself at this time.
Although times are strange, and the future uncertain, this is still your church,
and you haven't finished with us yet.
In quiet we pray for the churches of which we are a part, and the people who
are those churches.

[Silence]

Many in your world are in great need; in need of healing, in need of the basic
necessities of life, in need of hope, in need of peace.
In quiet we pray for those we know in particular need at this time.

[Silence]

Salford Methodist Circuit



Masked, I hide myself from this world.
Locked down, I feel apart from others.
But nothing can separate me from you.
Nothing stands between me and your love.
You are there, and you are listening to my thoughts and my prayers.

We pray for ourselves, and in quiet we invite you to touch us again with your peace.

[Silence]

Lord, You come to me,
You touch me, You wipe away my tears,
You smile at me, You embrace me,
Your healing touch irons out my fears, Lord, I thank You.

We offer all our prayers to you, and our worship, now and always. Amen.

Presentation to John Brocklehurst

Clare:

John, it's my absolute pleasure to present you with this certificate which commemorates 50 years as a Local Preacher and I just want to say how much we as a Circuit appreciate your contribution, wherever you happen to take it around the Circuit and we are very glad that you are still offering service at this time and may it continue for a very long time to come. Congratulations.

John:

Thank you very much, Clare. On behalf of the Circuit and Local Preachers. Although it has been 50 years, it doesn't seem 50 years since I first took my service at Barton Methodist in August 1969, since then many waters have gone under many bridges. It's been a delight and honour to serve our Lord in this way, thank you very much

Clare:

Thank you, I just want to say that John actually reached this milestone in April, but the pandemic has been a bit of a nuisance in getting to this point of being able to present it, but late than never I hope.

We sing our final song together, reminding us that we do everything in the presence, the love, the power and the peace of God. We are marching in the light of God.

Song: We are marching in the light of God

We are marching in the light of God,

Salford Methodist Circuit



*We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God,
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, marching, we are marching, marching,
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, marching, we are marching, marching,
We are marching in the light of God.*

*We are living in the love of God,
We are living in the love of God.
We are living in the love of God,
We are living in the love of God.
We are living, living, we are living, living
We are living in the love of God.
We are living, living, we are living, living
We are living in the love of God.*

*We are walking in the peace of God,
We are walking in the peace of God.
We are walking in the peace of God,
We are walking in the peace of God.
We are walking, walking, we are walking, walking,
We are walking in the peace of God.
We are walking, walking, we are walking, walking,
We are walking in the peace of God.*

*We are moving in the power of God,
We are moving in the power of God.
We are moving in the power of God,
We are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, moving, we are moving, moving,
We are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, moving, we are moving, moving,
We are moving in the power of God.*

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face; and the rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.
And may his blessing be upon you, this day, and always. Amen

CCL: 30925

Immortal, Invisible - Walter Chalmers Smith

Words and Music: © 2006, Thankyou Music. Administered by worshiptogether.com Songs. excluding UK & Europe, administered by Kingswaysongs, a division of David C Cook tym@kingsway.co.uk Used by permission.

O God, You Search Me And You Know Me - Bernadette Farrell

Words and Music © 1992 Bernadette Farrell. Published by OCP Publications, 5536 NE Hassalo,

Salford **Methodist** Circuit



Portland, OR 97213, USA. All Rights reserved

We Are Marching In The Light Of God - South African Traditional

v.1 Anders Nyberg (b. 1955) vv. 2, 3 Andrew Maries (b.1949)

Words: From Freedom is Coming v. 1 ©1987, WGRG, Iona Community, Glasgow G2 3DH Scotland. www.wgrg.co.uk

Words: vv. 2, 3 © Sovereign Music UK, PO Box 356, Leighton Buzzard W7 3WP sovereignmusic@aol.com