

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Second Sunday After Epiphany
Sunday, January 17th, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

Words from the American poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, 'The Mask'.

I don't know about you, but I have been thinking quite a bit about the wearing of masks over these last months. We have all been wearing them after all. We wear them partly to protect ourselves from the threat of the virus in other people, but also partly to protect others from any infection we may unknowingly be carrying ourselves.

In reflecting on this morning's Gospel, it occurs to me that Nathanael, who is described so beautifully by Jesus as 'an Israelite in whom there is no guile', calls us all to account for all the metaphorical masks we wear from day to day. Here is a man that Jesus sees as entirely genuine.

We all have to wear masks sometimes, of course. Like the little pieces of cloth, we cover our faces with at the moment, we wear them to protect ourselves. We wear a mask of smiles and positivity, even if we are far from being happy or positive inside,

because we wish to protect our inner self from the scrutiny and condemnation of others. Like our social media postings and photos, we want to present an attractive image of ourselves and our lives, because we know the sad truth of the American writer, Stanley Gordon's saying, "Smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone."

We also wear masks to protect others. We hide our fear and pain from those we love at times, because we don't want to make them unhappy, to infect them with our inner sadness and turmoil. I have also seen leaders in the Army wear masks in some dire situations, because they know that people are looking to them to be calm and hopeful, and so to reveal any inner fears or doubts they had, was not going to help anyone. As St Paul says, "If the trumpet maketh an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for the battle?" every leader knows this. As parents too, we don't tell our children things that will scare them or undermine their sense of security or happiness unless we really have to. Our job is to protect them from the world until they are strong enough to face it on their own. We wear a mask for their good.

Yes, we all wear masks for a range of very good reasons. Yet we also wear them for bad ones too. In a city like DC we are all too aware of the sweet smile and words of praise that can cover the very opposite of intent. Actually, I don't think this is any truer of DC than any other big city, even if Harry Truman did famously say, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog!"

Oscar Wilde's, *Dorian Gray* is a working out of this universal theme. In the story, Dorian Gray wishes that he could always remain like a portrait of himself painted as a young attractive man. He gets his wish, and his mask to the world remains handsome and innocent and young, but his sins and his misdeeds show instead on the portrait. As he pursues vigorously all the things St Paul warns against in today's Epistle, the portrait becomes more and more twisted and ugly until, in the end, he tries to destroy it because it is the evidence of the truth about himself. He tries to stab it with a knife, but is found dead next to it, a horrid and twisted old man stabbed to death, while the portrait is restored to its original youthful innocence and charm.

We know that there is a difference between the masks we all have to wear for ordinary decent living, and those other masks that cover real self-interest, malice, deceit, lust and even hatred. We know there is a difference, but we also know the

dividing line between the genuine and honorable, and the false and ignoble is a blurred one. We are horrified by the latter in others, but we also fear how close we get to it ourselves.

I don't know about you, but Nietzsche's famous words are very much in my mind this weekend.

“Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”

It's not so much the evil out there that frightens me, as what it threatens to engender in my own heart and soul.

In this season of Epiphany, we are asked to reflect on the ways that God makes himself manifest, or reveals himself to us. God himself, it turns out, also wears a mask, and we don't always recognize him at first. In the Old Testament Lesson, we have the young Samuel mistaking God's voice for that of the old man Eli. In the Gospel, Nathanael's initial reaction to Philip telling him about Jesus is skepticism. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, he asks. (And we can of course substitute all names of towns nearby where we grew up where we would have said exactly the same! Can anything good come out of Glasgow? I would have said, as a good Edinburgh man – two great rival cities in Scotland just 30 miles, and a world, apart!) Yet, when Nathanael meets Jesus his skepticism just disappears. His response to Jesus saying that he saw him under the fig tree, is almost comic in its hyperbole, and yet somehow, he sees that Jesus is God's ultimate mask. Behind that face, and in that presence, Nathanael recognizes the genuine divine, just as Jesus recognizes in him the genuine man.

In these troubled days, it is incumbent on all of us to look behind the masks around us as much as we can, and to try to discern what is genuine and what is false. To condemn inexcusable behavior such as we saw last week, whenever and wherever we find it, and also to beware of staring too hard into the abyss of our anger, whatever its focus, lest we start to become the very thing we despise.

The Contemplative Life Group ran an excellent Epiphany reflection last Sunday looking at how God reveals himself in the natural world, and in our fellow men and women. One section also reflected on how light changes entirely how things can look. A landscape, such as one I remember from the highlands back home, can one day can be full of warm pinks and soft lines and the very next day appear totally

differently, arrayed in slate grey and misty blues. All that has changed is the light. That is how God's presence works, I think. He is the light that changes how we see things. The light that reveals what is behind the masks that we and others wear. In our current time, it is probably impossible to hope that any of us can see clearly. All our eyes are misted up, in various degrees, with anger, fear and outrage at one aspect or another. How could they not be? This Epiphany, more than most, we would do well, like Eli and Samuel in the Temple and Nathanael under his fig tree, to step back, to pray, and, to try to let the anger and fear seep out of us into the wider silence. If we wait for God's voice and God's light and God's presence he will come.

Paul Laurence Dunbar's words we began with come out of the experience of very much darker days for black people in this country than our own, but like all great poetry, they apply universally to all human beings who find in Christ, the one person with whom we can be completely without guile.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

Let us pray that, the masks we wear really are only to protect ourselves and others and the good, until such time that we may set all of them aside in the last great epiphany and, as Jesus promised Nathanael, we see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.