

## Sunday Sermon 29 August 2021 - Rev'd Nicki Bullivant

Our Gospel reading today opens with the Pharisees leveling yet another accusation at Jesus, centering mainly on themes of purity and impurity.

I wonder did the Pharisees genuinely want to know the answer to the question about why the disciples had eaten without first washing their hands or was the question a veiled challenge to Jesus' authority or even an attempt to trap him?

According to traditional understanding of the law, contact with impure objects made you unclean and separated you from God. Physical impurity was seen as a sign of moral and spiritual impurity. For the Pharisees contagion was everywhere, there weren't just physical germs there were spiritual ones too. The world was dirty, sinners were dirty, and all that dirt was dangerous not only to their bodies but to their souls as well.

THAT is why the Pharisees were so appalled when Jesus' disciples ate without washing their hands. In their opinion it wasn't just bad manners it was bad faith.

Jesus in his reply doesn't dismiss the traditions and religious practices that had shaped him from his childhood, rather he redefines what it means to be unclean and defiled.

It is not a matter of outward appearances and observing certain rituals, but what is going on deep inside a person that really counts. What separates a person from God is not dirty hands but rather a hateful heart, bad intentions, and hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy refers to the disconnect between the values and standards we claim to live by and those that we actually live by.

The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word *hypocrites*, which means an actor or a stage player. Actors in Greek theatre wore large masks to mark which character they were playing, and the word took on an extended meaning to refer to any person who was wearing a figurative mask and pretending to be someone or something they were not.

All this talk of hand washing and wearing masks made me think of the journey that we have all been on for the past 18 months or so. To reduce the spread of the deadly and extremely contagious COVID 19 virus we are advised to wear masks, wash and sanitise our hands and keep a safe distance from each other.

But it's not just viruses that are contagious, there are many good and healthy things that are contagious too. When people laugh, often those around them start laughing. Laughter is contagious.

The love and life that are to be found in Christ are contagious. We have been commissioned by Jesus to pass on to others the love and life that we have received from God, spreading that love and far and wide.

On reflecting on this I began to think about the ways in which wearing a figurative mask makes it difficult for us to spread and share Christ's love and life to others.

When we wear face masks, it is often difficult to recognise each other. By wearing our figurative masks, by pretending to be someone and something that we are not it can become difficult to recognise Christ in each other and in the world around us.

When we are wearing face masks what we say may not be heard correctly, our voices can appear muffled and faint, we can sometimes be misunderstood. By wearing our figurative masks by not being true to who God has called us and made each of us to be, we may lose our ability to clearly share the Good News of the love and life that are to be found in Christ, or to coherently proclaiming light into darkness and hope into despair. Are our voices heard as we speak up for justice, mercy, and truth and for those who have no voice of their own?

During the pandemic I have worn many different masks to keep myself and others safe, special masks whilst nursing COVID 19 patients, other masks when the ward was COVID free, and different masks again for shopping and coming to church. Do I, do we, have different figurative masks that we wear with our different friendship groups? the mask of success, never admitting to failure; the mask of the victim, never admitting to hope; the mask of the clown; never admitting to sadness; the mask of the deeply religious, never admitting to doubt.

We assume masks like these because we do not like what we really are. It can be exhausting and soul-destroying to continually project an image which is not our own. It is worth noting whilst wearing our masks, we may mentally place masks on others, expecting them to play the parts we need them to play.

Wearing a face mask for 12 hours at a time as a nurse I sometimes developed sores and spots around my mouth as the toxins that I breathed out were trapped on my skin by the mask I was wearing.

Sometimes our figurative masks prevent us from effectively getting rid of the spiritual toxins of anger, offense, criticism and so many other harmful attitudes. These attitudes like spots and sores on the skin cause us pain, discomfort, and disfigurement. The longer we wear our masks the more painful the discomfort becomes, but we are loathe to remove them because others will then see the spots and blemishes behind our masks.

Some people find it difficult to breath if they are wearing a face mask. When we wear our figurative masks, we too can become short of breath. Our masks may well be suffocating the real you and me that are as it were trapped behind them. By wearing a mask, by not being who we truly are, we are putting ourselves under considerable strain. We desperately need the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit to revive us again. And for us to shed abroad the love and life of Christ we need the inspiration and enabling of the Holy Spirit, as we cannot do this in our own strength.

We wear face masks to protect ourselves and others from the deadly COVID 19 virus and I cannot stress enough the importance of doing so.

I don't wear a face mask at home and there have been times when I have left home without my face mask and had to rush back home to get it. There are times too when I have forgotten to put on my figurative mask and this has led to feelings of anxiety and fear, I feel

safe being me warts and all with those I love and who love me, but I can feel vulnerable and exposed when the real me is visible to those who don't know me well, who don't understand me or don't have my best interests at heart.

But why do we wear our figurative masks? Some of us do it to blend in, to desperately cover up our struggles and shortcomings, we don't want people to think badly of us, we want to be liked and accepted

Sometimes we even wear our masks to try and hide our true selves from God. The truth is we can't hide from him. In the Old Testament, when the prophet Samuel goes to find the person God has chosen to be King of Israel, God warns him, "don't forget. You only see the outside appearance; I see the heart."

God is not deceived by the appearance of strength or goodness or religion. God sees what is going on inside, he made us, he knows us completely and he loves us.

And in that love there is power- power to enable us to take off our figurative masks and accept ourselves for who we truly are; power to enable us to turn our lives around and face truth rather than live by lies; power to enable us to see behind the masks that others wear and to love them.

So how do we take off our figurative mask? It will require courage and perseverance to take them off as we may feel vulnerable and exposed, we may even start wearing them again out of habit and fear. We will need the support and encouragement of those around us. We can't do it in our own strength we need to invite Jesus Christ to see behind the mask we might be wearing, sticking with him even as he shows us truth about ourselves that we would rather not face, walking each day with him, one step at a time, learning to see not only ourselves but others in the light of his love.

May each and every one of us, through the grace of God and the life giving power of the Holy Spirit be humble and brave enough to love authentically. May we live life together in the flow of God's love so that we can pass on to others the love and life that we have received from Christ, spreading that love far and wide.