

Masked Up

Like a Phantom

Have you watched Phantom of the Opera? The **Phantom** is based upon a man named Erik who was born in a small village in Normandy, near Rouen. He was born with a horribly disfigured face, so his parents abandoned him when he was eight. A circus basically took him, and for 7 years he was used as an attraction. From his hideout beneath a 19th century Paris opera house, the brooding Phantom schemes to get closer to a female vocalist Christine. The Phantom, **wearing a mask to hide a congenital disfigurement**. Terrified at the notion of her absence, the Phantom enacts a plan to keep Christine by his side.

Today's Pandemic forces us all, at least here in Singapore to don a mask when we go out or get fined for not wearing one. There is a myriad of mask designs and decorative ones for kids as well, almost becoming a 'fashion statement' – *"my mask is nicer than yours."*

How do we feel about the face we are portraying for the world to see? Are we truly ourselves? Do we feel that we can be us, no matter what social situation we are in?

During this pandemic we change our masks daily. Some are disposable and some are washable and reusable for a limited number of times. We have been wearing face masks for some time now and post Covid when we can go out without the face masks, maybe some of us may feel strange without them. Yet we know that all of us wear invisible masks most of the time.



Face Off

So why are we wearing masks? Do we need to wear them for another year? It can be a very daunting task, as breathing can be more difficult for some. We wear masks to protect those in our midst, the elderly, the frail, those with pre-existing conditions, and those who are susceptible to the virus unknown to them or to us.

How many masks do we have at home? What types of masks do we prefer?

Beneath these masks, it's not easy to smile at one another.

Beneath these masks, we sometimes find ourselves breathless.

Beneath these masks we cover our tired, wrinkled, sweaty faces.



Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?

Insights into Personal Growth

"Do not hide your face from me" (Psalm 27:9)

In theatre, comedy and tragedy, masks are used to help the actors portray their emotions similar to how people in society wear a mask to portray emotions that are acceptable

Invisible Masks

Besides these necessary face masks during this Pandemic, there are also other kinds of masks that are invisible and unknown - to others and even to the self. We could be wearing multi layered masks without knowing it. These invisible masks must be peeled off and thrown away if we are to embrace our call to spread the epidemic of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and to stop the pandemic of fear and suspicion, hatred and violence.

Most of our lives we are not aware of the invisible masks we wear, yet when we lead faithful lives, God's grace, word and truth will most certainly slowly peel them off whether we like it or not - the inauthenticity, immoralities, impatience, greed, rage and pretence. Overtime, and sometimes miraculously, by the grace of God, such debase characteristics will most certainly transform into joy, peace, hope, kindness, generosity, patience and self-love. This is the pay-off to living an authentic, mask free life with God - surely less exhausting than a life masquerading like a masked phantom.



One of our greatest fears is that if we show our true selves, the world will say, "Oh, it's just you." Remember what the villagers said about Jesus in Nazareth, "Isn't this the carpenter's son." (Matthew 15:35). Jesus is being open and vulnerable, He is not concern about what others say or think of Him. What we see, is what we get.

Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?

In the book, *"Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?"*, John Powell, a Jesuit priest applies his valuable insights into self-awareness and interpersonal communication to help us develop self-esteem and improve our relationships with others. We all fear rejection. We are afraid that people will not like us if they know what we are really like, so we often assume poses [wear masks] to avoid being honest with them and with ourselves. Powell identifies five levels of communication and suggests that the kinds of information we disclose determine the level of depth of our relationships. Who are you? Are you the "Know-it-all"? Are you a "body beautiful"? Are you "the clown," "the competitor," the cynic," or one of the many other characters people portray to protect themselves? Only when we face our fears openly and honestly can we learn to like ourselves and trust that others will accept us as we really are. We wear invisible masks when we don't want our true selves to be seen. Becoming authentic is a process to begin knowing ourselves. To understand our own personality traits, behaviours, values, beliefs, needs, goals and motives. It's having the courage to acknowledge our limitations, and embrace our own vulnerability. Just as Adam and Eve attempted to hide their shame after they sinned in Eden (Genesis 3:1-8), we often hide behind these invisible masks because we are ashamed of our fears, weaknesses, and inadequacies. Or perhaps we do not want others to know who we really are inside.

Too many lives have been changed and each donning of a mask should be a moment of remembering, and ensuring we do not forget. Even as the people of God were urged not to forget their time in Egypt and in the wilderness so too we must not grow forgetful.

Emotions that are usually concealed under a mask are anger, anxiety, disgust, embarrassment, fear, frustration, sadness. These days with our face masks, we cannot even see if the other person is smiling, grinning or snarling at us. There is much “guarded-ness” and not enough “connected-ness”. Social distancing may have succeeded in keeping us apart, and the masks not only act as protective factor against the spread of the virus but has also made us unresponsive when it comes to responding to others and even at our mass gathering in churches. The priests have to answer the responses. Maybe because the sound coming out of our mouths are restraint with those masks.

May it be for each of us not just a health precaution but also a spiritual undertaking. May each wearing of a face mask become an act of penance, of remembering and of intercession. The wearing of the mask is a very visible symbol of this pandemic which, at least in part, has come about because of our poor stewardship of God’s creation. We have over-reached ourselves, over-exploited the planet, and in doing so have exposed ourselves to new viruses. We have arrogantly assumed that we were in charge of the planet and there was no limit to what we could achieve.

As we see the devastation the pandemic is having across the globe, we need a sense of penitence. We need to recognise that we have failed in our stewardship of God’s creation, and that there is a need for the amendment of our lives. Each time we put on our mask we should acknowledge how far we have strayed from God’s intention for creation. Just as the Bible speaks of wearing sackcloth and ashes so in our time the face mask has undertones of penance. Each time we wear a mask, and feel that it is slightly uncomfortable to breathe, we need to remember all those who have struggled for breath as a result of Covid-19. We need to remember those who are currently fighting this virus, those who have been left with long-term scarring although recovered from Covid-19, and those who have lost loved ones to this virus. As our focus turns to the lifting of the global lockdown, and the return to some semblance of normality, we need to remember all those whose lives (and indeed livelihoods) have been changed for ever by the pandemic, those for whom there can be no returning to the way things once were.

And, if we start to feel a little hot under our mask, or when we take it off we see its marks still on our face, then make that a moment of intercession. Throughout this pandemic and still across the globe health care workers spend the whole day in PPE – and full PPE is far more demanding to wear than just a mask. They need our prayers to sustain, protect and uphold them in their challenging work. The mask is another form of wearing a prayer shawl; it is our intercession.

Each putting on, and taking off, of a face covering or mask can be a moment of spiritual encounter, an act of penance, of remembering and of intercession. Our journey through this pandemic is not just a health crisis, it is also a spiritual journey. We are being asked profound questions about who we are and who we will be for each other. We can just put on a face mask for our own protection or we can also let it be a spiritual exercise that takes us beyond ourselves to an encounter with the other, and with God. Although for now we must cover up, spiritually now is the moment when we must once again open up ourselves to others, and to God, in penitence, in remembrance, in intercession. But being just us is actually the best and most perfect thing we could ever be.

As Oscar Wilde said, *“Be yourself; everyone else is taken.”* “Being Yourself” or “Being Authentic” is about not pretending you are more than you are. It’s a tremendous act of bravery to be original instead of a pathetic replication of someone else. Lacking spontaneity, originality or individuality is the worst flaw one can have, for a mediocre copy of someone else is taking one’s place.

Or if we are interested in the spiritual perspective, the Psalmist wrote, *“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well”* (Psalm 139:14)

“In reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Ephesians: 4:22-24).

Which mask are we needing to shed? Can we trust God is guiding us to live an authentic life of truth?