

23 August 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

Hymn: CH4 352: O for a thousand tongues

PRAYER

Lord God, we come before you in humble adoration. How blessed are we that the one who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven is the one who has the key to our hearts. Thank you, God, for the privilege of being part of the amazing story of faith that sustained our ancestors. Thank you, God, that we know our future is safe with you.

Lord, thank you that you are always ready to forgive us when we trust you enough to confess our sins to you.

Forgive us for the times when
just because someone else's story is different from ours
We don't always want to believe it.

Forgive us for the times we only live our stories,
not seeing the bigger picture.

Be merciful to us, O God.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come;

Thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory for ever.
Amen.

READING

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

¹⁴ They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

¹⁵ 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

¹⁷ Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

MESSAGE

To keep ourselves and those around us safe, we now have to wear a face covering/mask if we are in an indoors space in public.

We comply with this rule, because it makes sense, and we don't have a choice. But I've not met a single person who LIKES wearing a mask!

Because it's uncomfortable, it makes you feel warm and claustrophobic, and if you wear glasses, it makes your glasses steam up. It's also difficult to hear what someone is saying if they are wearing a mask, because you can't see their mouth.

And it's also not very easy to recognise someone if they are wearing a mask!

The purpose of these face coverings are not to hide one's identity – but all I need to do is to wear my mask and my sunglasses, and then there is a chance that some people might not be able to recognise me! / might have to hide my collar though!

But you know, all this talk about wearing masks, made me think of something: How often do we actually wear invisible masks? Not face coverings, but “masks” to hide who we really are? Or what we are feeling, or thinking?

How often have you smiled and said: “I'm fine thanks”, when actually you are breaking to pieces inside? Or have you showed your friends, or family, or colleagues, a version of you that you *think* they want to see, instead of who you really are?

Wearing a “mask” can be a coping strategy, but hiding your true identity, your real self, from those around you, can become an exhausting exercise... Way more uncomfortable than wearing a face covering to protect you from Covid19.

Where this kind of mask can protect you and your loved ones, even save lives; the other kind of mask, can probably do the complete opposite.

God made you who you are, and there is no need to hide that from the world. You might think that sometimes it's expected of you to pretend to be someone you are not, to fit in, to be accepted and to feel loved, but I think if we just are who God made us to be, people will love us even more...

In our reading Jesus asked his disciples 2 questions: Firstly, he asked: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And from their answers you can see that they really had no idea who Jesus were. Some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah – all important, life changing religious leaders from the past.

So at least they had one thing right – they knew Jesus was special.

But then he asked his closest friends: “What about you? Who do you say I am?”

And then Peter got it right. He said: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

But although Peter got the title right, he didn't yet know exactly what that meant.

At this point Jesus' followers still expected him to be a political redeemer, who would free them from Roman oppression. They had no idea what still lied ahead of him.

But the question of identity was a very important one in Biblical times. Remember that they didn't function as individuals in those days, like we do today.

Anthropologists describe people from Biblical times as "dyadic", or "other-oriented", which meant that they depended on others to provide them with a sense of who they were. They didn't act as individuals, but as members of a group, like a family. What one member of the family was, every member of the family was – psychologically as well as in every other way.

That's why, if someone was asked who they were, it was to identify their family or place of origin. For example: Saul, of Tarsus; Jesus, of Nazareth.

Encoded in that identification was all the information one needed to know where the person in question could be placed on the honour-scale. And then they would stereotype, like we read in John 1:46: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

By calling Jesus “Christ, the son of the living God”, Peter is – for the very first time in this Gospel – identifying Jesus with his real father – God; as opposed to his earthly family.

Nobody would of course believe Peter, and that is why Jesus asks them to keep it to themselves. The time wasn’t right to shout this from the rooftops yet. The world wasn’t ready to hear it.

And that is what I find so interesting about this passage: Jesus wasn’t wearing a mask.

He never pretended to be someone he wasn’t. He said and did what he knew God expected him to do. He was real. He healed people and changed people. He also made some people angry. But that didn’t stop him.

He was the Christ, the son of God, and at the end of his life people would realise that.

But while he was doing these things, openly, nobody recognised him for who he was. It was there – not hidden behind anything, in plain sight – but they just couldn’t see it.

We know, though. We know exactly who Jesus is. That’s why we can never pretend otherwise. And because we believe in him – that changes our identities too.

You can be whoever you want to be, we live in a time of unending possibilities, but ultimately, you are a child of God. And that should be

visible to others through how you live. Through what you do and what you say, as well as *how* you do and and *how* you say it.

And this is not something we should ever try to hide away from the world. We should be proud of being Christians!

We should never try to cover up that fact that we are children of God. Even if we find ourselves in a situation where people will frown on our faith. Even if it makes us stand out rather than blend in.

We should be proud of who we are! And we will never be able to be our true selves if we try to take God out of our identity.

When we moved into East Calder, there was a family with 2 wee girls over the wall from the manse. They must have heard the talk on the street that a new minister would be moving in soon, but I doubt that they had any idea what a minister was. Because they ran over to come introduce themselves, and as they ran back home, the youngest one shouted: "Mum, mum, I've just met the prime minister!!"

Let's not confuse the world by pretending, by wearing masks of any kind – apart from the ones that can protect us against Covid19.

Who am I? I'm Nanda Groenewald, a South African born, now Scottish lass, I'm a daughter, a wife, a mum, a friend, a minister (NOT the prime minister!). But most of all: I am a child of God.

And so are you. So let's rip off every single layer of the masks we don't have to wear, and show the world who we really are – people who can

stay standing amidst a devastating worldwide pandemic, because we know exactly who we are! We belong to God, and therefore, we are never alone.

Amen

HYMN

CH4 352:1-5

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace!

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life and health and peace.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.

He speaks, and listening to His voice
New life the dead receive
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice
The humble poor believe

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb

Your loosened tongues employ
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come
And leap, ye lame, for joy

My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad
The honours of thy name.