

Seen and Seeing! – Mark 1: 14-20

Technology is great isn't it? My phone is able to do amazing things all by itself. It can install the latest software as I sleep, record the number of hours I spend looking at the screen and send me endless notifications of when my library books are due, whose birthday it is that day and breaking news around the world.

It can even switch itself on when I pick it up – no passwords, buttons or fingerprints required – all due to the magic of face recognition. However in recent weeks I have had to remember my passcode as the phone has not learned to 'see' me through the mask.

Alfie has to have a sniff before he can recognise me when I am masked up and in rainy weather with my hood pulled up and a mask on my face, it is little wonder that people open the door and have to do a second take.

However despite the hindrances we experience from wearing masks, I will continue happily to don mine whenever and

wherever required as a simple way of keeping others safe. Yet not all masks are healthy choices.

In our reading today there is no mention of masks and yet running through this narrative is the idea of being seen, of being recognised, of being visible. The passage has always seemed to centre on the call to discipleship, the command to follow Jesus, the commission to make other disciples.

But as I thought about masks and how they can disguise our identity or make us feel unknown, unseen or invisible I began to look at these few verses in a different light.

Before Christmas we had looked at the different characters within the Nativity in the light of the pandemic. I think that lens still holds true. Just as the shepherds were the forgotten key workers who braved inhospitable working conditions in order to clothe and feed the wider population, fishermen could also fall into this category. Maybe even more so.

A dangerous occupation, they were at the mercy of the weather. Storms could blow up at any time when they were out in the midst of the sea. They had no guarantee that they would even catch a big enough haul to make their time and energy worthwhile. Then when they finally did make it back to shore they had the smelly task of gutting the fish – I would imagine they were not the first names on any dinner party guest list. Yet they too provided food and sustenance for their community. The health benefits of eating fish would not have gone unnoticed and it was a cheaper source of protein that could be accessed more quickly. So the fishermen, while not the most genteel of company, were essential to the communities health and well-being – providing nutritious, affordable meals.

But were they ever seen as individuals? Did the smell of gutted fish, mask them from others? How often did they go about their work and feel completely invisible?

Within this Gospel reading we are told '*Jesus...saw two fishermen*' and '*saw two other brothers*'. The Greek word

used is *eidon* and although it primarily is translated as seeing, it has a much richer definition. It also can mean to perceive, to notice, to become aware of, to consider. That conveys so much more than just a physical sighting. When Jesus saw these men, he did more than just lay eyes on them – he became aware of them, he noticed them, he considered them. They were not just abstract bodies who happened to be in his line of vision – Jesus saw them as individuals, he considered them, he took time to address them specifically. Such a small thing and yet Jesus did not ‘see’ the mask of their occupation, he was not put off by the ‘mask’ of unsavoury smells, he did not consider them in the light of the ‘masks’ others had placed upon them, he looked behind their ‘masks’ and declared them His people, His friends, His team.

Was this the first time these rough, pungent men had ever been addressed as worthy, as needed? The first time their skill at catching fish was acknowledged and more than this, required? Perhaps this was what really got their attention. A stranger striding out along the shore really seeing them for themselves. How many others had simply passed them by,

regarding them as invisible – unable or unwilling to see behind the masks?

There is something so attractive, so welcoming about being truly seen, being truly known. Jesus saw behind the mask of their, perceived, distasteful employment, saw them for who they were – His future disciples and in being seen, these men left what they knew and followed. There is something very powerful in being seen.

And there is something very powerful in seeing but there is always a choice in seeing. We can choose to see only the mask or we can choose to see behind the mask. Sometimes that mask is of our own making – we make up our minds about someone based on the mask we think they are wearing – it could be based on ethnicity, social standing, education, culture, wealth, where they live, how they speak, who they love, how they vote. These can all be masks we employ to prevent us from having to really ‘see’ the person. And when we address the ‘mask’ then we can make excuses for so many things. Those ‘masks’ become the justification for us

not to help, not to get involved, not to put ourselves out, not to consider different viewpoints.

And sometimes we use our own masks as a reason for shying away – masks of not good enough, not smart enough, not in the in crowd, past hurts, disappointments, failures, heartbreak, pretence. We know these masks too – they are our protection yet Jesus sees behind these masks as well.

Seen and seeing. We can choose if we are seen and we can choose how we see and we may be very tempted to hide away from this as it will leave us vulnerable, it may open us up to hurt and ridicule, it may cause us pain or discomfort, hit our pockets or our routines but some masks are not the healthiest option. We can blame this coronavirus for preventing us from living our full calling but just remember – Jesus began His ministry at a low point in His life. His beloved friend and cousin John had just been imprisoned – we are told this right at the start of description of Jesus's earthly ministry. *'After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God'*. His heart

may have been breaking also but Jesus still proclaimed the Good News, even in the face of evil that had imprisoned John.

We may be heartbroken, weary, despairing or disillusioned. We may be hopeful, joyful, encouraged or grateful. We may be resentful or tolerant, angry or patient. We may believe we have good reason for hiding ourselves away and waiting for things to get better, easier, safer, happier but a pandemic – heartbreaking and scary as it is, it is still no reason for us to give up on the work we have been given to do, the commission to be salt and light, the command to do to the least of these. Whatever mask we choose to wear or others choose for us, it will never prevent us from being truly seen, will never hinder the call in our lives, will never bar us from the offer of amazing love and forgiveness.

Masks have their place and we know those places but for the kingdom for God to be proclaimed and lived and shown we have to allow our masks to drop.

Heavenly Father -it is scary that you really see us. Really know us. Really get us. We cannot pretend with you. Cannot put on a good face, cannot bluff our way – you really see us. And scary though that may be it is also a relief. You know us and you love us. You see us and you still can use us. You consider us and through Jesus Christ you find us righteous and beloved. Thank you for seeing us and help us then to see others too AMEN