



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**December 25, 2020**  
*Christmas Day*

*Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity*  
*10am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

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### **What is Real?**

*“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”*

*“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”*

*“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit?*

Words from one of my favorite children’s stories – the Velveteen Rabbit. How important has story-telling become again for so many of us who are separated from our families. It is almost a year since the first outbreak of Coronavirus in China was made public and most of this year has felt unreal. At the height of the pandemic here in New York in late March and April, the city had an eerie feel about it. The great metropolis was almost silent for a while and many of us lived in fear.

At that time, most things moved on-line and thus began the misnomers of virtual this and digital that, and the insistence on social distancing. They are misnomers because when we gather via zoom, or Facetime, or WhatsApp, we are not watching a movie or a computer simulation; it is not a virtual world – it is a very real world. And when we think we are being socially distant, we most certainly are not, for we are created with an innate sense of sociability and we have found ways to continue being social beings and keeping ourselves safe by *physically* distancing ourselves. It is true that this physical distancing has been tempered by the use of electronic communication, but we have all been starved of something so human and so precious – the gift of touch. The profoundest sorrow has been experienced by many of us these past ten months – unable to visit our relatives in care homes; our loved ones in hospitals; or even show our love at the graveside.

When New York was in lock-down, only two of us could come into the Church to celebrate the mass. Some might suggest that it was a waste of time but, for your priests, offering the Eucharist centred us on our ministry and made a bold statement (albeit from behind closed doors) of the presence of God in the midst of our disease. It seems strange to talk about an ‘act of spiritual communion’ in a church for whom the protestant reformation is very much a part of its legacy, and yet that invitation to invite Jesus under your roof and into your heart is the most evangelical of notions. And, yes, we do celebrate the fact that, in spite of our unworthiness, he will speak the word and we shall be healed. At least we have avoided any misnomer in the mass – it is a *spiritual* communion rather than a virtual one.

Then, there are the masks.

It was not until we all started wearing masks that I realized that I was becoming hard of hearing. Not because the person I was talking to had a muffled voice, but because I was unable to lip-read; something I have clearly been doing for years. In addition, people cannot see my face either – they do not know when I am joking or teasing, when I am cross, or upset. And I cannot read their faces either. For me, it has heightened my sense of loneliness – of being alone.

All of this powerfully reminds me of the first lesson that is read at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols; the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

*“They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” (Genesis 1:8-10)*

As we read the story of the fall, we see that the relationship between the created and the Creator has become impaired. The man and the woman can no longer look God eye to eye and they hide from him. Instead of masks, of course, we are told that they sew fig leaves together because they were ashamed of their nakedness. In the situation we currently find ourselves in, I guess we could describe the meeting of God with Adam and Eve after the fall as a virtual event, and the ultimate in social distancing.

For me, the wearing of masks and the so-called virtual world that we have been forced to inhabit has had an unexpected consequence as the weeks turned into months. I have found it has actually intensified the **reality** of God in the world; in *my* world, in my relationships, and in my praying. I put on my mask but as I do so, I find myself praying that I will not hide my truest self from God or the people I love. It reminds me of the old prayers that we used to say when putting on our vestments in the sacristy. When the priest places the stole around his or her neck, this prayer is said:

*Redde mihi, Domine,  
stolam immortalitatis...*

‘Lord, restore the stole of immortality, which I lost through the actions of our first parents, and although I am unworthy to approach your sacred mysteries, may I gain eternal joy.’

So, when you put on your mask, use it as a little sacramental – a reminder to pray that although you are covering your face, you are not hiding yourself from God, and therefore not hiding yourself from those around you.

In his new book written as a series of reflections during the pandemic, Rowan Williams says this:

*“We talk a lot about ‘the face we present to the world’, about ‘saving face’ or ‘losing face’, about ‘putting a brave face on things’ – and so much of this kind of language suggests that a ‘face’ is something we can work on and polish until it shows only what we want to show. We don’t want our faces to ‘betray’ us. But when we turn to God (to borrow one of Saint Paul’s most striking images) the ‘veil is removed’; we can’t put on any kind of face for him, we are left naked to his gaze. If we can gradually get used to the painful recognition involved in this, the recognition of our humiliating fondness for fairy tales about what we are really like, we can turn also to each other and get used to a higher degree of honesty and mutual understanding.”<sup>1</sup>*

Writing to the Corinthian Church, Paul says *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:11-12)*

What we celebrate this Christmas, even in this time of pandemic, is a reversal of the fall; a celebration of the invitation of God to once again look at him face to face. “Where are you?” God calls but we no longer need to hide. Why? Because he sent his Son into the world to redeem the world, and remove the masks that we create once and for all.

We read in the Book of Wisdom, *‘For while all things were in quiet silence, and that night was in the midst of her swift course, Thine Almighty word leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne, as a fierce man of war into the midst of a land of destruction.’* (Wisdom 18:14-15a)

God’s eternal Word became flesh in the womb of Mary. The one who brought all things into existence, makes himself small in order to bring humankind back to himself. In Jesus, we see a foretaste of what we can truly be – perfect images of our creator. Colossians 1:15 – *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”* And as we read in our Epistle reading today, he is *“the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person.”* (Hebrews 1:3)

That emptying of God into his creation seems utterly reckless and foolish. But it is this very foolishness of God that has become our greatest hope. Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in two when Jesus died on the cross, revealing for the first time the Holy of Holies, so God takes away the masks that hide our real selves from him by fully revealing himself in Jesus Christ; and he challenges the notion of social distancing by stretching out his arms upon the cross to draw the whole created order to himself. No more virtual world, the love of God is so powerful it can bring us to our fullest potential if only we would allow it.

*“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”*

*“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”*

*“You become. It takes a long time” said the Skin Horse. “Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”*

***“He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.”*** (John 1:10-11)

The first Adam hid himself from his Creator; the Second Adam was God incarnate in the world that he had created, repairing once and for all the estrangement between God and humankind, inviting all people into a deeper and more perfect relationship with him.

***“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”*** (John 1:12-13)

So, my friends, the irony is that in discovering the reality of God’s redemptive love, we actually discover the reality of *our own* existence. And responding to that love can be hard – it *can* hurt – for it demands that we look God (as it were) in the eye, and reveal our deepest selves; so much that makes us ashamed, but all that makes us real. If we attempt to do this, we will glimpse again the glory of God and the shocking reality that his glory is meant to be part of who we are:

***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.***” (John 1:14-15)

<sup>1</sup> From ‘Faith, Hope and Love in a Time of Pandemic’ page 44 (Kindle)