



Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci (early 16th century): face-covering added in 2020...

“Who are you? What do you say about yourself?” John 1.22b

The Mona Lisa wears a smile that is inscrutable at the best of times. But here, Leonardo’s legendary enigma is masked too. And the face of the Italian noblewoman Lisa Gherardini has suddenly become not just enigmatic but completely unreadable.

We’ve become very used to masks. If it helps in the fight against the virus, most of us are only too happy to hook one round our ears as we leave home. And, on our return, most of us also peel it off with relief. For as well as being a bother, masks inhibit recognition and communication. They make it harder to hear what people are saying, to see what people are feeling. Our capacity for knowing and being known is compromised.

This Advent, our enforced mask-wearing might teach us a thing or two about the *invisible* masks we all so often wear. It’s human nature to do so. We strap them on throughout our lives both to limit how much others see of our losses, our frailties and failures, and to help us to feel safer and stronger than we really are.

When the crowds bombard John the Baptist with questions about his identity, there is no hint of pretence, no mask. He knows both who he is and who he is *not*. He is not Elijah or ‘the prophet’ or the Messiah. He doesn’t attempt to be anything other than a heralding voice, a cry in the wilderness.

“Who are you? What do you say about yourself?” Advent is a perfect time to ask *ourselves* these questions in the company not of a clamouring crowd but of God, who knows us through and through and longs for us to be fully and authentically all that he intends.

Now is the time to drop those invisible masks, to acknowledge our aching vulnerability and let ourselves bask in holy, unconditional love.

“If you are so weary with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want God, yet are still dissatisfied that you don’t, you are already keeping Advent in your life.”

Maria Boulding

Prayer

**From all that masks us
from each other and from you,
free us, O God,
Amen**