# 1. THE MASK

Nobody really knew. For that matter, I didn't really know. It was so artfully concealed that even those closest to me could only have sensed that things were a bit out of kilter. But that's all. Most probably put it down to being a more emotional or melancholy sort. 'Oh, Mark? He's OK – a bit up and down, perhaps, but basically just a typical arty type!' I always described myself as an emotional yoyo anyway.

But, in late 2005, I had to come to terms with a situation that was more serious than that. Prior to that point, I had masked it – not least, from myself.

## On the pros and cons of masks

I was one of those antediluvian types who studied Classics (Latin and Greek) at university. But having been heading that way for many years, I didn't find myself as gripped by it as some (I eventually switched to theology, studying each for two years). There was one exception: Greek tragedy. These ancient plays seemed grippingly contemporary – I especially

fell in love with Euripides. Sure, the plots were outlandish, with gods and demigods prancing around and wreaking havoc on the affairs of princes and cities. But the ways these dramas probed the impact on people's lives, and even psychology, was nothing short of breathtaking. They could have been describing events in the news. This was true despite what (for modern audiences) must be the plays' strangest aspect: the masks.

Imagine some great theatre, a monumental seashell carved out of a Mediterranean mountainside. At the base of this banked semicircle is the circular stage, backed by a great wall of doors, alcoves and openings on multiple levels, from which actors playing gods might intervene in the drama. All the main action takes place on the central stage, however. The genius of these buildings is that the sightlines and acoustics are perfect, despite being open to the elements. An entire audience can see and hear everything. Because all the actors wear identical clay masks, however, the one skill they never require is facial expression. Their movements are rigidly stylized as well. Instead, they must rely *entirely* on the script and their vocal skills to move audiences to tears or laughter. But this they consistently achieve.

The purpose of these masks was to focus an audience's attention on the characters and not the actors bringing them to life. The effect, I suppose, is a bit like movie stars hidden by layers of prosthetics or digital animation. The mask also reminds the audience that this is make-believe; it is pretence; it is in fact a lie. All acting is lying. But here is the great paradox of drama: if these lies are acted convincingly, truth (whether about reality or relationships) gets conveyed powerfully.

We are perfectly familiar with this, and, in our entertainment-obsessed world, we applaud those who can pull off the widest range of parts.

But should we always be so impressed? The ancient Greek word for actor was *hypocritēs* (ὑποκρῑτής), which, at first, only implied someone who explained or interpreted something. But by New Testament times, it was more negative. It suggested someone who was untrustworthy. They pretended to be one thing while underneath being something else; they presented a good front to mask their reality.

Of course, it needs to be recognized that this is not *always* negative. Temporary masks have their place, and nearly all of us make use of them. On occasion, it may even be *right* to use them. We really shouldn't blurt out every thought that pops into our heads. That usually does more harm than good. Self-control is an important virtue, and so this type of mask is as much for others' protection as anything else.

At other times, it is neither appropriate nor necessary for those around us to be aware of every vulnerability or anxiety. A mask is thus a form of protection, necessary to shield emotional wounds from being aggravated, or from being exposed at an inappropriate moment. It is an act, in some ways – 'I'm fine,' we say – a pretence that all is well. That is not a lie as such, but an act of self-defence. As one good friend remarked to me, 'fine' can actually serve as an acronym, standing for 'Feelings Inside Not Expressed!'. It is an understandable mask, and if we never made use of it, we would probably never escape those after-church conversations that already seem interminable enough.

This mask is particularly important for those in Christian ministry. As we seek to pastor and love others, especially the vulnerable, there are times when we must swallow our pride or irritation, ignore our own needs or pressing concerns, for the sake of the urgent or important. We must show consistency and integrity, of course. But when I climb into a pulpit, I may be feeling 1,001 different things, most of which

would be irrelevant, inappropriate or unhelpful to mention. We have a duty to teach what is true and healthy, even if we might wish to be miles away. We act out of Christian duty, which invariably conflicts with our emotions and passions. This is true even in normal family life, where it might be necessary to park a discussion or argument because of something more pressing (such as friends coming for a meal). Unsurprisingly, it is necessary in upfront ministry as well. This is not avoidance, but finding the right moment (unless, of course, we don't return to it).

In the strictest sense, that could be defined as hypocrisy. We *are* pretending. We *are* acting. But because of the complexity of human nature, there is a sense in which none of us can avoid being hypocritical to some degree. None of us ever has perfectly aligned motives or desires. Even Jesus found himself in great conflict in the Garden of Gethsemane – his deepest fears were militating against his determination to do his Father's will (Matthew 26:36–46).

What matters, I suppose, is how regularly this happens when doing our duty. No-one can be expected to hold in constant balance their duty and passions, their beliefs, feelings and actions, their words and deeds. Being 'out of sync' is not hypocrisy – only the pretence of always being 'in sync' is. And this is where we begin to home in on what Jesus was so critical of. He lambasted the Pharisees for their claims to perfection and their subsequent self-righteous contempt for others:

> You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.
> (Matthew 23:27–28)

The issue is how honest we are about our weakness and flaws.

Self-defence masks are like that. They are not Pharisaical, they rarely claim perfection, nor do they make people self-righteous. The problem comes when wearing them becomes a habitual, or even permanent, way of being. This was what happened to me. Since childhood, I had developed self-defence habits that kept me going temporarily, but which proved unsustainable long-term. It was as if the ancient actor's mask had become glued to my face. I played a part – of the approachable, sorted, though emotionally up and down, friend, and later pastor. So, for example, after I first mentioned my depression diagnosis in public (during a question and answer session at a church retreat), a friend came up to me in shock. She remarked that had she known there was a church staff member with this diagnosis, she would never have guessed it was me.

But this mask was artificial. It concealed reality and inhibited support. Nobody who's 'fine' needs help . . . right? So the mask inevitably started cracking, revealing that things really were not right.

As I consider how things developed in the subsequent years, three specific moments are lodged in my mind as indicative of how bad things had become.

## Three signs that could not be ignored

### *Fear: tears before beauty*

Just weeks after our return from four years in Kampala, Uganda, I was minding my own business in one of my favourite places in the whole world: the Wallace Collection. It's an astonishing place – a beautiful house in central London developed to showcase a remarkable private art collection. It is an oasis of beauty and calm in one of the world's most

frenetic cities. Poussin, Velázquez, Titian, Gainsborough, Rubens, Canaletto . . . they're all there. If you know anything about art history, those are big names. Breathtaking!

But I always make a beeline for the Rembrandts. In particular, his portrait of his son, Titus. It is bursting with love and affection, as well as insight into this headstrong young man. What a gift for alchemy Rembrandt had – the ability to breathe life into dead strokes of paint on cloth. I could gaze for hours, lost in the moment.

And then I heard the sirens of distant police cars. I found myself transported in an altogether different way, fixed to the spot, no longer looking at the painting. Instead, I was suddenly, vividly back in Kampala, with a traffic police officer the size of a rugby prop-forward sitting in the passenger seat of my vehicle. And the tears started silently pouring.

Many of my anxieties were provoked by an inability to trust those in authority, as those who have read my book *A Wilderness of Mirrors* well know.[1] One of the darkest episodes of our Uganda years was the abduction and torture of one of my best students. We'll call him M. With his young family, M. had fled from DR Congo as a refugee, and was a gifted and experienced minister. He had already planted churches in the countries he had lived in: Rwanda and Kenya. Then, in Uganda, where he hoped finally to settle, he was offered a pastorate in one of Kampala's slum areas. In the coming months, he unearthed some illegal activity by a corrupt local politician, and so attempted to speak truth to power. As we subsequently discovered, M. was too much of a threat, and so the 'big man' arranged for him to be 'dealt with'.

One night, M. disappeared in sinister circumstances. He stepped out of the family home at around 7.30 pm wearing only his pyjamas and slippers, and then he just vanished. In great distress, M.'s wife reported the disappearance to the

local police station. But it soon became apparent that the officers there were complicit, presumably paid off by the 'big man'. When we tried to follow up M.'s missing person report a day later, these files too had 'disappeared'.

A week after his disappearance, M. was dumped in a forest several hours north of Kampala, naked, drugged and horrifically injured. I can hardly bear to imagine the sight – perhaps something akin to Legion, the demon-possessed man of Mark 5. Yet, miraculously, he found help, even managing to get transport back to the capital. That evening I visited him in hospital. He was in a terrible state. And very scared.

His captors had threatened to kill him if he didn't leave Uganda. But that was easier said than done. As a vulnerable, anonymous refugee up against some evidently powerful people, nobody would risk looking after him. It was much easier for me to be involved as a foreigner. The only hope was to get him and the family out of the country legally. But, for that to happen, it had to be through the auspices of UNHCR.[2] Thus, as evidence of what this dear brother had endured, he asked me to take photographs of all his grotesque injuries. I had flashbacks for months. I dread to think of the continued impact the entire ordeal still has on M. For eighteen months or so, we were committed to keeping his family alive and safe. Generous friends in the UK and USA sent us funds to pay rent on different properties to which the family relocated every few months. It was an incredibly stressful time. We couldn't even begin to process it all until we returned to London, even though, a year before, we had experienced the ecstatic joy of receiving a text message the moment M. and his family touched down safely in Toronto.

To make matters worse for my mental state, I had twice been arrested on ridiculous charges within our first few months in Uganda by traffic police wanting bribes. I fully

understood it at one level – they were expected to live on hopelessly inadequate salaries, so they would often target foreigners just before Christmas. How else could they afford gifts for their children? But the first occasion made an indelible impact on me. We had only been in the country for a few weeks, and so were borrowing a car before getting our own. Little did I know that the vehicle's tax disc on the window had expired three days before. The officer got into the passenger seat with his clipboard and wanted to see my papers. At that stage, I didn't have my Ugandan driving licence, so offered him my UK licence.

As he copied out my details, he asked with a barely suppressed smirk, 'Ah! Are you a reverend?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Well, *Caesar* has you now!'

For this green and relatively innocent Brit from a privileged and safe background, this was a shock, to say the least. I've replayed those words often. They betray a startling intelligence and insight that could only have come from more than a passing acquaintance of the New Testament world. They seemed maliciously calculated to convey maximum unease.

He then boomed, 'Buy me a crate of beer!'

'I don't think that's right, is it?'

'No, it's *wrong*,' he said and grinned.

Our stand-off continued for the best part of an hour, and then, eventually, he asked me to drop him back near his post, and I went on my way. But I was a wreck when I reached home.

The Lord clearly had a strange sense of humour. Some time later, I found myself preaching inside the national police barracks headquarters one Sunday morning. I had got to know a number of Christian officers who genuinely wanted to live differently, but their lives were almost unbearable at

times. This did help me to appreciate their predicament, but it never cured my anxieties. On my daily drive to college, police checkpoints were common, with perhaps a fortnightly stop to examine papers. It meant that I sometimes needed a moment in prayer for sufficient calm just to set off to work.

Being back in London didn't seem to change anything. I was still anxious about the police. Or *any* authority or institution, for that matter. Then, in around 2005/2006, there was some legislation going through the British Parliament that could have made life much more difficult for Christian ministers to work – it made the possibility of arrest seem entirely plausible. Fortunately, it was soon defeated, although, as it happened, by only one vote.[3]

But when I stood rooted to the spot in the Rembrandt room, I was convinced it was the last time I'd be able to see such beauty. The sirens were coming for me. I was going down. For life. And I'd be tortured. Just like M. And I couldn't bear it. So down the tears poured. Nothing could stop them.

This was the first of several panic attacks over the coming months. It was clearly abnormal. And irrational. Something was badly wrong.

No mask could possibly conceal that now.

***Shame: silenced in the snow***

Some years later, I spent a week staying with friends in Berlin. I was there during my sabbatical in 2013 to do background research for *A Wilderness of Mirrors*, and it was my first visit to that great city. Berlin's unique historical significance, particularly during the Cold War, had long been a source of great fascination for me.

On one particular day, I visited the headquarters of the Stasi (East Germany's infamous secret police) which was chilling in its nondescript functionality and minimalism.[4]

I then retraced, on foot, a section of the route of the Berlin Wall, including the now over-touristy Checkpoint Charlie. As one might expect, it was a day to stir all kinds of emotions and thoughts.

I then headed back to my hosts, but distractedly boarded the wrong tram. It was no great disaster. I simply got off at the nearest stop and waited for the next one in the opposite direction. I found myself standing at a deserted passenger shelter at dusk, in a completely unknown part of what had been East Berlin, just as snow was beginning to fall. One couldn't have contrived a better set-up for an agent rendezvous in a spy thriller. Only a few years before, my incompetence would have put me in a genuinely frightening predicament. But not in 2013. I wasn't afraid. Instead, something far stranger happened.

As I stood in the gently swirling snow, I suddenly, but inexplicably, felt overwhelmed. Inexplicable, because it actually had nothing to do with where I was or what I was doing, as I now realize. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of shame. That's different from guilt. It's much more all-encompassing and debilitating than that. It's not simply embarrassment (the fear of which is, of course, the great British disease, and the source of most British humour) – although I was mildly embarrassed about having taken the wrong tram.

No, I was ashamed of *myself*. I was ashamed of my weakness and frailty. Why hadn't I dealt with my depression (oh, how I detest the word!)? Over seven years since my formal diagnosis, why hadn't I managed just to 'snap out of it'? I was ashamed to be the kind of person that gets depressed; ashamed to be someone who couldn't be normal, or happy, or, dare I say it, reliable; ashamed of my many failings as a husband and a father, of the way my issues affected the family so adversely;

ashamed that I, a church minister, had mental health 'issues'. After all, weren't we supposed to minister to other people and *their* issues, not wallow in the sludge of our *own*?

It was a relief to be alone at that moment – there was no need to explain my silent tears. But I look back now on that strange, solitary moment with an even greater sense of relief, because it forced me to face realities about myself and depression with greater honesty. It led to wide reading about the nature of shame, and led me even to start writing about it. I have since discovered how much more common an affliction it is in Western churches, certainly more than I had ever been led to believe. Yet it is so rarely aired or discussed, to the terrible detriment of us all.

But that was to come, only after professional help and support. Back in March 2013, I was just bewildered, lacking the vocabulary to articulate what I felt. The important thing to appreciate, though, is that I didn't recognize it as shame. The only feeling it seemed to resemble was guilt. I couldn't distinguish between the two. But that didn't make sense. Nothing I had done seemed remotely able to explain the billows of despair and lostness.

***Confusion: pounding the walls***

It was now late 2015, a couple of years after my sabbatical. I had taken the strange (and, to some minds, reckless) decision to leave my amazing job after nine years on the staff of All Souls, Langham Place. There were several reasons, but the most pressing was the need for work that offered greater flexibility for managing my health. I had always longed for more time to write, and there was more than enough work to keep me occupied, even part-time, with my responsibilities for developing pastoral training in Europe for Langham Partnership. It did make sense.

What I hadn't anticipated was the accumulative effect of all this sudden change. We had to move out of our wonderful church flat in central London, to a new neighbourhood in which we knew nobody. I no longer had fixed points in my week, no longer had a clear role within a community, and was no longer on a team that met regularly. The problem with our Langham team is that we're spread out all over the globe, and so are never actually all awake at the same time! To complicate matters still further, writing by its very nature is a solitary exercise, which, as one writer friend with similar battles has observed, is not exactly conducive to well-being when battling depression.

So I found myself spiralling out of control as my world seemed to shrink. It was as if so much of the scaffolding that made life liveable had been stripped back – and I had only myself to blame. I was the one who had decided to go freelance, after all. Nobody forced me into it.

But I made mistakes with others, not least in unrealistic, and even unfair, expectations of what friendship might look like. I naturally gravitated towards the few I knew who had similar battles, because they at least could understand. Nobody else did. I was desperate for connection with others, longing for companionship in what I was going through. I didn't have the words. I just had the pain unmasked, with the nerve endings too close to the surface. It was raw.

A problem was that one of my sabbatical resolutions had been to ditch the mask, or at least try to. I'd begun to recognize its symptoms. I had spent years unwittingly giving the impression that all was well, despite needing help. So it had probably come as something of a shock to colleagues hoping I would return refreshed and renewed. Instead, I undoubtedly showed less confidence or stability. I was even asked by one

well-meaning congregation member why I 'wasn't feeling better after my sabbatical'! The irony was that I *had* taken positive steps by ditching the mask. I just appeared worse than before. It must have been very confusing to those around me. And, to be fair, I didn't tell anyone that this was what I'd resolved!

So that autumn, I found myself alone for much of the time in our rented north London house, with the children at school most of the day and Rachel continuing her pioneering All Souls ministry to carers and toddlers. Meanwhile, I was isolated, and thus isolating myself, in a spiral of negativity. I had all this time now when I wasn't travelling for Langham, and I was supposed to be making the most of it for writing. That was what I'd always wanted, wasn't it? But I couldn't even do that. I just sat at my desk, either staring into the middle distance or idly surfing through inane YouTube clips. It felt pathetic . . . and selfish (generous friends were now funding our new life).

But this perfect storm left me feeling bereft of *every single one* of my moorings. Even the few friends I had hoped might be sympathetic or understanding seemed too preoccupied or fearful. I don't blame them at all – none of us really anticipated this. But I found it bewildering and terrifying.

Because the worst thing of all was the total absence of God.

One moment sums it up. I was alone in the house, early one evening. For whatever reason, I decided to have a shower. Sudden waves of sorrow, fear and even anger overwhelmed me. They began without the slightest warning. This time I wasn't just weeping, but convulsed by tears, crying out. To family. To friends. To God. Of course, nobody could hear me. And nor, it seemed, could God. I was pounding the bathroom walls with my fists and crying out for God to do something.

Anything. And then I just slumped in the shower, exhausted and depleted. It had been a rare moment of intense energy amidst hours and days of the cruel tedium of what Winston Churchill had called his 'black dog'.

It is bizarre perhaps that I never cried 'why me?'. Many do, of course, and I certainly don't blame them for that. Yet it's never been a question I have struggled with. Perhaps it is because there are just too many inexplicable horrors in this world; perhaps it is because of what we had witnessed in Africa; perhaps it is because I well appreciate how genuinely privileged my life has been. I could equally ask the same question for my many blessings.

The question that I cannot get out of my head, however, is simpler. Just 'why?' So much of mental illness, with its associated disorientating perspectives, paranoias and pains, makes no sense. It is irrational and without obvious cause. But its effects are obvious enough, if only to the sufferer. Then, there is the salt that gets poured on open wounds. Why do others seem to get it wrong so often? Why does mental illness fill some with such fear or stigma? Why does it bring out the worst do-gooding or meddling instincts in others? Why do so many with mental illness end up so alone and isolated? Why? I pounded the shower walls with that question over and over until I was spent.

Some answers can be found, of course. But they only go so far, until we come up against the limits of human understanding and divine revelation.

But, at the darkest moments, the *sole* reason why I felt I could still do business with God in my bewilderment was what he allowed to be included in the Bible. To be more precise, it was the Psalms. A God who could handle a psalmist praying these things was one that I had no right altogether to dismiss:

My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
'Where is your God?'
(Psalm 42:3)

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
(Psalm 130:1–2)

And most extraordinary of all:

. . . your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
You have taken from me friend and neighbour –
darkness is my closest friend.
(Psalm 88:16–18)

That is why I am still here, feeble sometimes, flawed always, clinging on to the Jesus of Gethsemane and Golgotha.