

# God unmasked

by David Wilbourne

I am an old hand at wearing masks. In the sixties all seven boys from our village queued for the school bus on a wintry mornings, sporting navy blue balaclavas, with just their rheumy eyes peeping out, like a troop of apprentice IRA militants about to go on a heist. We recognised each other by traces of a hastily consumed breakfast that still lingered on our woollen chins: ‘Ah, I see you had porridge, again, Ernest.’

Come spring and summer, balaclavas were swapped for a diagonally folded spotted handkerchief masking our mouth. The country air was very pure back then, and needed no filtering, but the handkerchief enabled us to play the part of the masked stranger in games of Cowboys and Indians. My hankie was always marked with oil-stains from repairing my dad’s Suffolk Colt lawnmower, which gave me a worn and hardened look. It was too small to wrap around my neck, so I had to be content with sticking the ends in my ears. This meant that my victims, bank-tellers and dusky maidens rendered subservient by my pointing two fingers at them, had to shout to make themselves heard by their mysterious attacker.



Westerns featured on the TV virtually every night in the sixties, *Rawhide*, *the Virginian*, *the Lone Ranger*... No programme was complete without a cowboy disguising himself, pulling his neckerchief over his nose and mouth and baffling the bank he robbed or the maiden he kidnapped as to his identity. We, who’d been watching the programme for just five minutes knew precisely who he was, whereas the American townsfolk, who had known the guy since childhood, seemed clueless.

*The Lone Ranger* wore a better class of mask, over his eyes like a French fop attending a masquerade, gyrating to the [\*William Tell Overture\*](#). He must however have been easily traceable, because he always gave away the identity of his unmasked and trusty Red Indian assistant - ‘Get help, Tonto’ - and unmasked white horse - ‘Hi, ho, Silver!’ - shades of [\*‘Don’t tell him, Pike!’\*](#) The title Red Indian was a touch tautologous on our grainy black and white TV; I was never quite sure whether red referred to the colour of his skin, or his habit of blushing over the fine messes his boss kept getting him into. I suppose it was Sixties-speak for indigenous American, already a racial minority who attracted more violence than his un-indigenous counterpart.





When I grew up I moved on from childish things, except for the last 11 years I have sported a mitre, which nicely covers my bald patch, protects my head from sun-burn and makes me look like an idiot, lest there was any doubt. My Boss in South Wales always accused me of being like *the Lone Ranger*. I took it as the greatest compliment, [riding into valley after sad valley](#), standing alongside them in Christ's name and then leaving as promptly as I had arrived. 'Gee, who was that mitred stranger, boyo? I wanted to thank him, see.'

They had a thing in Old Testament times about veiling unmarried women, which led to Jacob getting the wrong girl, and serving his time with Leah (Hebrew for cow) instead of Rachel (Hebrew for lamb). They also veiled God, shrouding him in incense, avoiding looking him in the face, [lest they die](#).

Jesus did away with all that, and was God-straight, God unmasked, God naked. Literally naked in the Bethlehem stable and on Calvary's cross, and maybe even in the Easter Garden appearing to Mary, after all, he left the grave clothes folded in the tomb. Tradition has it that [Mary Magdalene](#) (her feast day's this coming Friday) was formerly a good-time girl, so had seen it all. So even though she twice averts her gaze, she wouldn't be as shocked as we Anglicans would be, who provide the Bethlehem babe and our crucified Saviour with a wisp of starched cloth to mask the embarrassing bits. We're OK with nails being hammered through his wrists and shins, a crown of thorns tearing his scalp and spears penetrating his side, but we draw the line at nakedness. We do have our standards, after all.

Jesus unmasked God and humanity through stilling storms and healing the sick and raising the dead, giving away the creation that was his heavenly Father's desire. He unmasked God through telling parables, like today's [Parable of the Sower](#) (Matthew 13:24-43). God is generous to the point of being profligate, scattering his seed wherever. That seed could stand for his word, his law, his kingdom, his love, his grace... Most reject it, a minority let it take root and turn the world upside down.

From my days of playing cowboys and Indians, I remember a children's rhyme:

*Four beans in a row.  
One for the rook, one for the crow.  
One to rot, and only one to grow.*

But the seed that grows feeds the world, as we are called to feed the world on Christ. As you go about doing that, it may be not a bad idea to hide your identity by wearing a mask. You never know, people might mistake you for Him. ['Gee, and I wanted to thank him!'](#)