



Diocese of Toronto
Anglican Church of Canada

Friday, September 4, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

From late November until the early spring, we and kids from our neighbourhood would hit the street to play road hockey. Most days after school, two nets would be set up between parked cars and we would play till supper was called. Sometimes there were five or six of us and sometimes as many as a dozen – shooting, passing, scoring and making saves. There were no fans in the stands, like the NHL playoffs during COVID-19, just the odd car passing through our imaginary rink. Their intrusion carried a collective cry of “CAR!” Nets were removed and players stepped to the curb like a commercial break in the big leagues, and then play resumed as they passed by.

We wore our heroes’ jerseys. We were Canadiens, Leafs and Bruins. We were numbers 4, 19 and 7. I loved playing goalie, defending the net, keeping the ball out, making saves (still doing that). I wore number 29 in bleu, blanc et rouge. In the early days, my equipment was primitive: a stick, baseball glove, and three extra sweaters for padding. Believe me, it didn’t help much. I had bruises on my shins from sticks attempting to swipe the ball, and every now and again a welt would appear on my face after getting hit with a frozen tennis ball.

Under the tree on Christmas day in 1973 were a pair of goalie pads and a mask. My cries of suffering had been heard, relief had come. The pads covered a multitude of wounds. The goalie mask was rudimentary – a plastic form with two eye holes and one for the mouth, all held in place by elastic bands. While you couldn’t see very well through the peep holes and the darn thing didn’t stay still on my face and sweat always built up inside, by golly it was better than nothing. Deeper still, the mask gave me a new-found confidence beyond just ducking.

Since late spring, we have all been getting used to wearing masks. Putting them on when stepping into the grocery store, the office, a public place. Taking them off, misplacing them, dropping them, hanging them from one ear, over the rear-view mirror of the car, crumpling them in a pocket. Some of us have one mask, some have many. Some are hand-made, others store-bought, some plain and some decorated. For those of us who spend time in the public square, wearing a mask is becoming a new habit.

As we step back into our church buildings, step back into play, we will all be donning masks in worship. It has been my experience so far that leading the liturgy and preaching while wearing a mask isn’t easy. I find it difficult to steady my breathing while striving to project loud enough to be heard. Slowing the pace of speaking helps. And yet sometimes I find the darn mask keeps moving around and I am constantly trying to readjust it. Other times my reading glasses get fogged up or the material becomes too damp. It’s a pain and yet it’s a pain worth enduring.

With reopening only ten days away, I urge everyone to practice wearing a mask for church. What will it be like for you to pray, to listen, to read, to speak, to preach or to preside with your face covered and your mouth obscured? How does it work, and how does it feel for you, when your ability to animate and articulate your words are compromised? And, like so much else in this pandemic, how is God teaching us new and sacrificial ways of doing things to serve each other?

The mask and the protocols for re-entry provide us with the confidence to gather, to don the vestments of our tradition, to feast on the word that is a salve to our wounds and to break the bread that brings life.

Yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Andrew Asbil
Bishop of Toronto