

“You shall be like Him” 1 John 3:1-7

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

We have something very precious. Our loving God has given it to us. John spoke about it in His first letter. It is ours. I am talking about our status. About who we truly are, that is, God's children, and what it means for us.

The problem is that this gift, our God given status, has been partly taken from us and partly we ourselves are guilty of giving it up. I propose that today we first look at what has gone wrong and then at what can be done to reclaim this precious gift of God.

It is well known tendency that churches in the West are declining. The East and the South is totally different story. There are many healthy and rapidly growing churches, and millions and millions of people who are thirsty and hungry for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But in the West churches have been declining for a good while. And the best and brightest minds among us have been trying to analyze this situation, to understand what is going on and what can be done.

One of the main problems is this. The world, especially the elites, those who shape the views of our society, they look at Christians as to the people of a lower status. That's right, they look down at us.

They perceive Christians as a remnant from the dark ages, as superstitious bunch who still fights against the science and progress, as people on the wrong side of the history, etc.

We want it or not, but in the eyes of society our status is low. Picture how people would look at you if you introduced yourself as a Christian. “Hello, my name is Guntars. I am ... a Christian.” If I said a writer, or a businessman, or even a spiritual person, the reaction would be different.

How are we as Christians to respond? How are we to address this problem? So far too often Christians have responded in a wrong way. We haven't responded by standing upright and proudly showing who we are, instead, under this pressure we have tried to become something that we are not.

You know what self-esteem is, right? That's how you perceive yourself, your status. Can you think what people with low self-esteem look like and act like? They are shy, afraid to take stand, they are very vulnerable to any critique, they are desperate to please others, they really don't think much of themselves.

This is exactly how we could describe many churches in the West, Australia including. We don't think much of ourselves, for we are almost all the time looked down by our neighbors, sometimes even relatives and friends, by society, often ridiculed and made fun of even publicly.

Churches have been very vulnerable to critique, to such extent that they are happy to do whatever it takes, so that only they could get some affirmation from those who criticize them.

That's why it was thought to be a good idea to change with times. I still hear this one in Barossa. But how could we change with times? If one becomes more like the society around us, and then they will like us.

It has been done a lot. Many churches have tried to become more like the world and have tried to get rid of whatever makes us look different. It is sad to list everything that has been done with good intentions.

Many churches have exchanged our Biblically rich sermons to shallow feel-good encouragement. Many have exchanged the preaching of God's glorious Kingdom and our eternal hope, to talking about politics or social justice. Many have exchanged God's wisdom to popular self-help psychology.

Many churches have exchanged our rich hymns to songs with three or four words in them. Others have exchanged the millennia deep traditions of the Divine Service to ever changing attempts to entertain ignorant crowds.

Many churches have exchanged our beautiful Church architecture to sad looking shed-like buildings. Too many have exchanged Christian virtues and holy life to indulgence of almost every sin, of course, in the name of love and inclusivity.

Haven't Christians acted as people with low self-esteem? And after this was done, people begun to wonder, – why are our churches shrinking? Because there was almost nothing left that would make the Church the Church. No more beauty, no more depth, no more wisdom.

This experiment has failed. With the bang! This is tragic. This is very sad. And perhaps you can recognize that we too are not guiltless in what was just described. Here and there we have been a part of the problem.

Fortunately, there have always been faithful Christians who have cherished what is true, and beautiful, and holy, and precious, and wise, and deep and pure. The Lord willing, more and more will learn again how to appreciate what is worth appreciation and not something cheap and shallow. The truth is, that the world, and especially the younger generations, they have no problems with what

faithful churches looks like. They have no problems with rituals, or mystery, or holiness, or beauty, or reverence, or hymns, or liturgy.

They thirst for it. They thirst for the sacred. Because these things are the answers to our deepest longings. And people flourish when they receive these treasures. Just one example. There is a rapidly growing church in Chicago.

They had to build a new building as they couldn't host everyone for their services. Their congregation consist mostly of young people in their twenties and thirties. What is their secret?

There is not secret. They have tried to be faithful to what is entrust to us. They summarize their emphasis as – Biblical preaching and mystery and beauty of the Divine service. That simple.

God's wisdom that by far supersedes the wisdom of this world, mystery of God's own presence among us in the Word and in the Sacrament, beauty of our sacred buildings and our sacred music, – this is what people crave for in their hearts, and this is what we are called and sent to share with them.

The words of John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, from today's reading, help us to understand why the world looks down to Christians. John writes: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him". Meaning the Triune God.

The world doesn't have a problem with our rituals, or music, or buildings, they have problem with God. They don't know Him, and this is, why they don't know us, God's children, as we truly are. This is, why they look down to us.

It is simple, and we can understand it. But it is different with the issue of our self-esteem as Christians, with how we perceive our status. Somewhere along the line we have dropped the ball. We have believed what the world says. Now I want you to pick it up again. I want you to pay attention to what I will say.

I want you to memorize it and to say these words to yourself ten times per day. Or twenty, or more if needed ... until it sinks in what your status is. What am I going to say? Here it comes, from the pen of John the beloved disciple.

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God's children now, and [...] when He appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

God the Father loves you so much, that He has made you His child. And this is who you are. A child of God. This is who you are now, and when Jesus Christ appears in His divine, heavenly glory, you will be like Him.

Think about this! Again, and again! Remember it! Memorize it! See, all human beings are created in God's own image and likeness, and that makes every human being infinitely precious in God's eyes. But you are so much more.

Not only God's creatures, but also His children. His own family. Jesus has made you His own. So that you would live with Him in everlasting blessedness. And when Jesus returns to bring forth the New Heavens and New Earth, you are going to be like Him, and you will see Him as He is.

If anyone should be rejoicing about their status, it is us, Christians. It really doesn't matter how the world looks at us. They don't know God, they don't know what glorious future is coming, and they don't know us.

But we know the Triune God. What is even more, He knows you. He is our Father in Heaven. Jesus Christ calls us His friends, His brothers and sisters. His family. The Holy Spirit dwells in us and unites us with the Holy God with the most intimate bond.

If there ever is a high status here on earth, it is ours. We are God's heirs and co-heirs with Jesus. Eternal life and eternal reign is ours. That is this hope and assurance that has allowed so many of our brothers and sisters to stand steadfast facing ridicule, persecutions, even death.

They could do it, for they knew who they were. And I want you to know it too. Learn this and repeat these words to yourself and to one another. You are children of God, because God loves you so much, and you will be like resurrected Jesus.

This is the greatest dream that anyone could dream, and for you it is not a dream, it is a given reality. Promised by Jesus. We can't change how the world thinks about us, only the Holy Spirit can.

But we can be sure about how important, how precious we are to our God. We can learn to appreciate and be proud about the treasures entrusted to us. About God's unsearchable wisdom given to us in the Bible, about God's presence.

About His holiness, about reverence and awe in God's presence, about the Divine liturgy, about beautiful music and architecture, about living virtuous and holy lives as we try to be the light for this world.

This is, who we are, this is, what we are called to do. This is, why the Holy Spirit dwells with us, to enable us to live this way. This is, why God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit comes to us every week, – to bless you, to love you, to embrace you, to strengthen you, so that we could live every day, knowing with our whole heart and mind, who we are.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ... we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”

Amen.