

“Stand firm in the Lord!” Philippians 3:17-4:1

“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This is an incredible calling. Truly incredible! Magnificent! I am talking about the calling to preach the Gospel. I don't think there is anything like that in this world. As Paul describes it, we are called to be “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Stewards of the mysteries ... of God!

Remember, mystery is something that we can study, and marvel about and even describe to a certain extent, but we can never ever get to the bottom of it, to the point where we can state: “That's it, now we have understood everything”.

There is always more depth, more layers, more of God's incomprehensible wisdom. The mysteries of the Triune God... What in the world could be more exciting, more intriguing and more satisfying than to listen to and to learn from the One who was there in the beginning?

Through whom was created everything that there is and who still holds everything together! The only true God the Creator and Redeemer of human race. God whom we are privileged to call our Father, who has become our brother as Jesus Christ and God the Holy Spirit who indwells in His people.

The mysteries of God... We often call them simply the Word and the Sacraments. But mysteries they truly are. Just imagine what kind of divine reality we are dealing with. The words that we speak on behalf of Jesus and by His command, they are Spirit and Life. They are filled with Spirit and Life.

Meaning, to those who listen, to those who are humbly receptive to God's message, these words bring God's own Spirit and eternal Life. They are like streams of living water that the Triune God Himself pours over us. Over you!

The message of God is spoken, the Holy Spirit brings it to you, a new reality is created, He declares you to be His beloved child, innocent and glorious, He creates a new heart in you, and you are able to respond with love to His love.

We are made from enemies into family members, from hostile rebels into loving and obedient children of our gracious Father. He Himself daily renews you as you listen to Him, and you keep receiving eternal life, that life that comes from the very source of life, our Triune God.

O, Lord, help us to marvel at your goodness, at your mysteries, bless us richly with your Spirit, enlighten us, fill us with your joy and create in all of us the hunger and thirst for your Word and for your presence!

This is indeed an incredible calling, and I want to encourage those of you – and you know who you are – whom the Holy Spirit may already have marked for this calling, trust when our Father calls you, for He who calls will also provide for you and will bless you more than you can hope for.

And you, dear brothers and sisters, you have enabled me to enjoy this incredible stewardship of the mysteries of God for quite a while. Thanks to you I have been able to weekly rejoice discovering new and new treasures of God's grace and mercy and wisdom and beauty and to share them with you. Good times...

Nine years. Almost to the day. Some days it seems like a long time. Other days, not a big deal. But there are some objective criteria that reminds us that it's been a while since we arrived here. These are the criteria that I have in mind...

[... on the screen... in the Service...]

We have been blessed, richly blessed and the greatest blessings have been those coming from the mouth of the Lord as He has worked tirelessly to kill our old and selfish selves and to shape us to be more and more like His Son Jesus. But there is so much more to be done... it's good He never gives up on us.

It was interesting, as I was contemplating what would I need to say in my last sermon at Grace, the Spirit sent me some ideas, and it was quite surprising to see that our reading for today, speaks exactly on those topics. This is how our all-wise and gracious God works in His mysterious ways.

What is Paul speaking about as he writes to fellow Christians at Philippi?

“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”

This is a topic, which I would prefer didn't exist. Then we shouldn't need to worry about it, or to talk about it. We could just enjoy the bliss. But it does exist. Paul speaks about this ancient battle that is going on among us every day.

It's been so since the beginning and it will last till our Lord Jesus Christ returns in His glory to renew this world and to bring forth New Heavens and New Earth, without sin and death, without mourning and crying, full of peace and joy. It is this battle between good and evil.

Between light and darkness. Between life and death. Between the world in rebellion to God and the Kingdom of God, the Church of Christ. But it is not what we may want to picture it is. It is not us, good people of God, versus those not so good people of the world. No! This battle is being waged in the Church.

Listen to these uncomfortable words of Jesus: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Mt 7:15) Or think about His parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. The weeds are the sons of the evil one.” (Mt 13:24-26, 38)

Or this is from Paul: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock... I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20:28-30)

From Peter: “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.” (2 Pet 2:1)

From John: “Children, it is the last hour ... now many antichrists have come... They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” (1 John 2:18-19)

This is quite challenging a reality to embrace, but the battlefield is the Church. It seems hard to believe, but after Paul the apostle had preached the Gospel, others came and tried to convince those Christians that Paul was wrong, and many believed that false gospel, and rejected Paul.

Peter experienced the same. For John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, his own congregation refused to welcome fellow brothers sent by John. By John the beloved apostle of Jesus! They rejected him and his teaching!

I remember how the principal of our Seminary in Latvia Dr Reinhard Slenczka used to encourage us – if there are conflicts in a church when it comes to the pure preaching and teaching of God’s Word... that is good.

For it means that that church is spiritually alive. It is when no one cares about what is being preached and taught, when the whole focus has switched to attracting and pleasing people, then it’s bad... that church then is dead.

As the glorified Jesus issues this scary warning to churches in His revelation to John: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Rev 3:15-16)

It is the pure Word of God that brings us all the magnificent gifts of God; adoption into God’s family, forgiveness, the Spirit of God and the life eternal, and if the evil one can snatch that Word from us, or to distort it, or to lull us into spiritual sleep where we don’t care anymore, he has won and we have lost...

So also, Paul in the letter to Philippians speaks with tears on the same challenge: “For many ... walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds

set on earthly things.” He speaks with tears about those who have lost in this battle, who have chosen the world over the following Jesus. With their hearts set on earthly things. Desiring to please people more than God.

Walking the ways of the world, trying to blend in, to be loved and praised by the world, neglecting or even despising the message of the cross, becoming enemies of the cross. This is our ongoing challenge.

See, this battle not only happens in the Church, it happens in each one of us. We are the battlefield. Look at us! Humanly speaking, are we different from any other group of people in Barossa?

How are we different? We have the same vices, the same passions, the same cravings, the same sins that this society in which we live. We all share in the sinful conditions of human race. We are no exempt from it. Not at all...

You know it better than I do; there is greed among us, coveting, sexual passions, violence, there is gossiping, we too give in to anger, can be jealous and bitter, or lukewarm and indifferent, we often struggle to admit that we have sinned, we may be slow to forgive and even slower to ask for forgiveness.

It is not our supreme goodness and perfection that sets us apart. No! Not at all! It is something else. The goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ! Writing to Christians in Philippi Paul reminds also to us how are we different, and what a magnificent reminded it is! Just listen!

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.”

Hear this, brothers and sisters! Your citizenship is in heaven! What does this mean? That you belong to the Trine God. That He not only has adopted you into His family, He has united you with Himself by means of His Holy Spirit indwelling in you. It is not our goodness that sets us apart, it is our Father’s undeserved grace and mercy that bestows all these incredible gifts upon us.

I pray that this sinks in – the eternal and almighty God has embraced you with His Spirit, He, the very source of life has united you to Himself. This life will surely end, but that will be only the beginning for those who listen to the Lord.

By the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself, to hold everything together, to have authority over everything in heaven and on earth, He will transform your lowly body to be like His glorious body.

You will be transformed and made like risen Jesus. Beautiful, excellent, adorable, glorious, as your Creator always intended you to be. Not to live an idle life, bored among clouds, but to actively reign over God’s creation together with Jesus and all the countless multitudes of God’s saints. That’s His promise to you...

But for now, we are still here, and while we are here, we are to be as Jesus said “the salt of the earth”. There is a mystery in it as well. A joyful mystery. Too often we can see churches suffering from low self-esteem, so to speak.

Churches often see themselves as those small, shrinking and aging communities, which are left almost unnoticed by the mighty and the powerful of this world. Who are we?! Thus, Christians often fail to recognize their true significance.

But ... we are not a small and insignificant group of people, left to dry on their own in this vast, vast world which goes its way. The history of the world – is the history of the Church. God who is our Father keeps this world spinning for the sake of His beloved children, for you! You are the reason the history goes on.

For our Father is waiting for the last one of His chosen and beloved children to respond to His invitation and to take their place in the heavenly feast. When all the seats are filled, when that last one of God’s chosen people has returned to Him, the world as we know will cease to exist. That is when Jesus comes back.

See, how significant you are! Remember Sodom and Gomorrah? Large, flourishing cities... and what happened? They become so, so corrupt because of their affluence. There was no reason to keep them going.

God wanted to destroy them, and remember His conversation with Abraham? If only there will be 10 of God’s faithful remaining, He will spare those cities. Only 10 of God’s people would be enough to keep them going. There were no ten left.

But now you see, how important your role is, to be the salt, people of God, salted by the Word of God, faithful, passionate, firm and bold and winsome in your confession of God’s truth. We may not realize our impact, but one day you will know how important for the whole community was the fact that you kept faith.

This is our last Sunday together. At least for now. I am sure that I will see many of you again, some sooner, some later. But I am also sure there are those, whom I will not see any more in this life. These may be our last minutes together.

And I wonder, what will our next meeting be like? And what will you look like? Will you greet me when I arrive to our ultimate destination? Or will I greet you? Or maybe it will be our Lord Jesus who will bring us together:

“Do you remember him? Do you remember her?” And I will gaze at those incredibly beautiful and glorious people: “Yes, Jesus, I remember them, we used to feast together at your holy meal in Tanunda!” Then Jesus will put His hand around our shoulders and say: “Let’s go and feast, for there is so much for us to do, and there are so many waiting for you!”

Probably it will be something even more joyful, and more heart-warming and more beautiful... But for now, may I pray together with Paul the apostle: “My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Stand firm in the Lord!”

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit! Amen.