

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

When I was a young boy, I enjoyed comic books as most young people my age did. Many of those comic books continue to be published, but they have become edgier; grittier; darker. The heroes aren't always as heroic as they were in the past. That became more evident as Hollywood capitalized on super heroes with a series of Superman movies, the Batman movies, Spiderman, The Avengers and X-Men and others.

Even if comic books weren't your cup of tea, I imagine that you are familiar at least with Superman. He does, after all, have Canadian roots. The Man of Steel, as he was called, was very visible in his blue tights with the blazing red and gold "S" on it. But he was not just Superman, he was also mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent. His "secret identity" was designed to protect his family and friends from retaliation or danger from Superman's enemies.

Now, it always seemed a bit of a stretch that the only thing that was really different between Clark Kent and Superman was the glasses that Kent wore, and a slightly different hairstyle that Superman had. At least Batman and Spiderman wore masks to hide their identity. Didn't you want to just kick people every once in a while and say, "Hey, can't you see it? It's just a pair of glasses! Clark Kent and Superman are the same person!"

We, the people of God, sometimes act as if we have two identities—the one that we bring to church with us on Sunday morning, and the one that we display before the world during the week. So often it seems that our 'secret identity' is the spiritual identity. We may even be afraid of letting people know that we are Christians. But Peter tells us that we should know who we are, and we are to let the world know who we are, too! Our not so secret identity is who we are in Christ, as we show ourselves to be the people of God, proclaiming the glories of the God who has made us heroes in Christ.

Forget the whole idea of secret identities for a minute: the truth is that people struggle with simply trying to know who they are. Over the years I have heard quite a few people tell me that they didn't know who they were, and that they had to 'find' themselves. Often that desire comes from people who aren't satisfied with their lives. Sometimes there are other reasons. A young man learns that he was adopted, so he goes out, spends years of his life—and much money—searching for his birth mother, because he wants to know more about his 'real' heritage. A young wife who is abused by her husband and who has always lost herself to his control isn't sure that she knows who she really is. She wants to find out what she likes and what she can do, without being told or threatened to conform a certain way. But many people simply are not happy with who they are. They look in the mirror and they don't like what they see so they go out and try to change their appearance. Psychologists will talk about low self-esteem, or low feeling of self-worth. It isn't because they are bad people, who should feel that they are not what they ought to be; it may be simply that they do not like themselves very much, and are convinced that no one else who really matters likes them either. They often feel that even God doesn't love them.

Peter tells us very clearly in our text today who we are. He says: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.* What a wonderful identity we have! We are the chosen people of God. Peter adds: *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* While we have done nothing worthy of His goodness, while we have continued to sin and be less than a prize when measured only against the scale of His holiness, God chose us to be His people. There was a time when we didn't belong, when we were outside of His mercy. We don't deserve mercy because of our sin. We have willingly, deliberately and stubbornly turned from the holiness of God to serve ourselves. We have been blind to His leading and guiding, and have cared only about the things we have wanted.

And yet, we have received mercy. God has brought us into His kingdom of grace and light. Jesus tells us in the Gospel lesson today: *In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*

***And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*** (John 14:2-3 - ESV) That great mercy is made known through the cross of Jesus Christ. There, on that cross, God redeems us as His own. He bought us at a great cost. That is what Paul was talking about when he said: ***You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*** (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 - ESV) We belong to God—the God who has every right to claim us as His own because He created us, but we are especially dear to God who has redeemed us—who has bought us back as His own—through His own Son, who suffers the pain of the cross and dies for us. If you ever doubt your self worth, focus on what God thinks of you. He loved you enough to let His Son suffer and die in your place. He loves you enough to take away your guilt and shame, your inadequacies and failures; your evil thoughts and sins by making His own Son pay the price for it.

But God doesn't bring us into His household the way that many ancient people bought slaves and indentured servants. No, He gives us this wonderful, new identity as a treasured, special part of His household. How special are you? Jesus tells us: ***Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.*** (Matthew 10:29-31 - ESV) And, through the prophet Isaiah, God declares to us: ***you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you*** (Isaiah 43:4 - ESV)

If we ever doubt our identity, our worth, or our self-esteem, we need to stop looking inward and look at what God has made us to be: ***you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.*** God makes us His own and gives us this wonderful new life as His children. But this is not a secret identity. Peter says that in this glorious existence, we ***proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*** To a great extent, that is what we have done today as we have gathered in His name to sing His praises. The psalmist says: ***Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favour is for a lifetime.*** (Psalm 30:4-5 - ESV) We praise God for all He has done for us. We rejoice in the life He has given us. Boldly, joyfully, and confidently we proclaim His excellencies so that everyone will know what God has done. Again, we hear a psalmist declare: ***Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul.*** (Psalm 66:16 - ESV) God gives us so many opportunities to let people know what He has done for us. We can speak of Him at work, at school, when we are on the golf course or when we are dining with friends. We share our hope, our joy, our life in Christ as we pray at the table before meals, or when we let people know we are going to be in church to meet with our Saviour on Sunday.

But we also declare God's praises in the life that we live. Peter tells us in our Epistle lesson today to ***put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.*** (1 Peter 2:1 - ESV) The life we live as the people of God should show and declare that we are His people, that we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation. But this is sometimes where we, who should know who we are, are determined to keep this identity secret from the world. A young man, leaving home for the first time as he was going off to college, was told by his father, "Son, never forget whose son you are." That was the father's way of saying, "you know what it means to be my child and to live as part of this family. Don't let the influence of others keep you from living as my son." Or think of the young man who went north to work in the lumber camps one summer. His friends were concerned that he may not be able to survive the rough, often worldly way of the camp. When the summer was over, his friends asked how things went. "Oh, fine", the young man said. "I was there all summer, and no one even knew that I was a Christian."

Is that something we do, too? Are we ashamed of the fact that we are the redeemed, forgiven and chosen people of God? Are we concerned that people are going to look at us differently because we are Christians? Are we afraid that we won't fit in, or are we afraid of ending up like Stephen and being martyred for our faith?

Jesus tells us: ***let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*** (Matthew 5:16 - ESV) We are not to hide our lives as the children of God. We are different, because we have received mercy in Jesus Christ. We have died to sin and are alive to God in the Saviour who died for our sin and rose to give us that life. We aren't to hide this away, but to rejoice in the blessings of the life we have in Christ.

When you are in doubt as to who you are, remember what Peter says: ***you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.*** But don't keep that identity secret. Let it be even more obvious than Clark Kent and Superman. Don't hide your light under a bushel, as we say. Let others see, by your deeds, your words and your actions that you know who you are—that you are the child of a king through faith in Jesus Christ, and in this way ***proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*** Amen.