

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-10  
THE KEY...

“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing”. What is the main thing about Christian faith? What is the main thing about the church? How would you answer that question? What would be your answer? We might all have different answers: you might think that the main thing about the Christian faith is knowing the Bible and being able to quote it when people quiz you; you might think that prayer is the main thing about being a Christian; you might think that the main thing about church is having a nice building, which is warm, comfortable, and well-appointed; you might think that the main thing about church is having a minister, who does a decent job of preaching and leading; you might think that the main thing is the Guild, or being an elder, or having lots of children around, or... or... or... There could be almost as many answers as there are those of us in room this morning!

Jesus was once asked what He thought was the main thing. It wasn't put quite like that; it was more a question about the greatest commandment, but it's much the same idea. I wonder if you remember what He said: *“Love the...”* (Matthew 22:37ff) Actually there are two main things there, but we'll give Him the benefit of the doubt! Love God, love other people – this was the main thing as far as Jesus was concerned. How do we make sure that our Christian faith and that our church is shaped by these two ideas, to love God and love other people? It is so easy to be side-tracked into all sorts of other things – plans, mission statements, minute details of reports, even things that are good and necessary, but that we forget the main thing as far as Jesus was concerned – to love God and to love other people.

Paul gives us a different view of the main thing, but in fact the main thing as far as Paul is concerned is the key to open up “love God and love other people”. For him the main thing is entirely something that God does; God is at heart of this main thing and is at work through this main thing. *“I resolved...”* (1 Corinthians 2:2) This is a great verse for preachers: sometimes people ask the preacher “if you had one sermon to preach what would it be?” Or the preacher is in a new place, preaching for the first time to new group of people; what do you preach? Here is the main thing for the Christian preacher, to preach *“Jesus...”* (1 Corinthians 2:2) Paul was in Corinth for 18 months preaching; he resolved to preach Jesus and the cross. For 18 months did he preach the same sermon every week? Probably not! He spent 18 months *“teaching them the word of God”* (Acts 18:11); the heart of that message was Jesus and the cross.

We saw last week, in chapter 1, Paul explain to the Christians in Corinth why the cross was so important: *“Christ...”* (1 Corinthians 1:24) The cross was the place where God worked out our salvation, the right thing at the right time; what may seem strange to us or to the world, that a crucified man could do anything for us, the gospel tells us that the cross is exactly the place where God achieved salvation for us, for the world and forever. Now Paul tells us that the cross is the main thing about his ministry; he will tell people about the cross; he will explain what the cross means; he will try to persuade people to believe the message of the cross because it is so important! Nothing else comes close for him; this is the main thing for him as a preacher because this is the main thing for us as Christians and for our faith.

This is Paul's message, but that's not why people should believe it! See what he says about himself and his ministry: *“When I...”* (1 Corinthians 2:1) *“I came...”* (1 Corinthians 2:3f) Should Christians in Corinth believe Paul because he was a confident preacher? Should they believe Paul because he came with lots of eloquence, big words, and profound ideas? Should they believe him because he was clearly a very wise man who knew things they didn't know? The answer to all of these questions is “no!” That's not why they were to believe Paul! He claims to have come with none of these gifts and abilities: he was not eloquent, or extra-wise; he was not confident, but full of fear and trembling, needing God to reassure him that his ministry was good. He came *“with a...”* (1 Corinthians 2:4f) What happened when Paul preached? People

believed him! People were persuaded that he was telling truth! People came to faith because of his message. This is the power of the Spirit is at work in Corinth; this is the Spirit at work wherever people believe the preacher when the gospel is preached. I can't make anyone into a Christian; I can't make you believe my message; it is the Spirit's job to persuade, because this is God's gospel, God's power! That's the foundation for our faith, the Spirit at work!

Why the cross? Why is the cross the main thing? The whole idea of the "key" set me thinking; the cross is the main thing because it is the key to almost everything Christian! Here are four examples.

The cross is key to salvation. There is good news; for a flawed and messy world, there is salvation; for flawed and messy people, there is salvation. There is forgiveness for our faults and mistakes; we are set free from the power of the dark side of human nature; we are reconciled with God as His friends and family, with new sense of who we are. All of this is totally centred on Jesus on the cross; the cross is the place where Jesus did all of this for us, where He achieved our salvation for us. This is cemented and guaranteed when Jesus was raised from the dead; without one, the other doesn't work. The cross was the focus of Jesus' whole life and ministry; it was the reason why he came; He set His face deliberately to go to Jerusalem, knowing that the cross was waiting for Him. All four people who tell His story in the Bible focus our attention on that last week in His life. The cross is key to salvation.

The cross is key to hope. One day life will be better. Is that not what we hope? At all sorts of levels? When make a mistake, or make a mess of something, perhaps the same mistake made over and over again, it is so easy to plumb the depths of despair. "Life is always going to be the same; I'm always going to get things wrong; life will never change!" The cross (and the resurrection) is the place where things changed forever. We have the most profound sense of hope, hope that life can be changed and that we are not miserable failures; hope that God does forgive; ultimately the hope that we will be with Jesus and share His glory forever. Christians in Corinth were changed when the Spirit went to work on them as Paul told them about the cross; they became new people, people full of hope in their hearts because of what God had done for them on the cross. "Hope is here!" – that was our Easter poster from a few years ago; when I put that up on our new noticeboard, someone at the bus stop told me it was just what he needed to read. The picture on the poster was of the cross and the resurrection!

The cross is the key to life when it is hard. This is the toughest door to unlock! This is where we struggle most to understand God! The cross is the key to life when it is hard! God's relationship to us is cross-shaped. Is God sitting on a pink fluffy cloud? Is God somehow above our world, outside our world, untouched by the harsh realities of life as we live it? Not the God of the Bible! The God of the Bible has come to live in the harsh world that we live in; the God of the Bible has come to share in the sufferings and sorrows of our lives. The evidence for all of that is the cross! On the night before He died, Jesus prayed in the garden; the sweat poured out of Him as He agonised over the choice He was making. Would He run away? Would He go the way of the cross? It was agony because He knew that the cross meant physical suffering; He knew that the cross would mean mental agony; He knew that the cross would mean a spiritual sense of hell. But Jesus went that way; now when we go that way, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, He is able to help us; He knows how it feels; He knows what we need and is able to help us.

Finally, the cross is key to relationships. I want you to make a list of all the people you know, wherever you meet them; how well do you get on with them? How well do they treat you? Right, now tear up that list because this is not about them, this is about you and me. For everyone we meet, wherever we meet them, our way of relating to them needs to be cross-shaped! At the cross, Jesus showed us how much He loved us; He loved us enough to give His life. That's how we are to love! We are to love others in the way that Jesus has loved us! No matter who that person is, no matter where we meet them, no matter if this is someone we

live with, someone see every day and know them intimately, or someone we've never met before, our attitude is to be cross-shaped. We are to love. We may never have to give up our life for someone, but will we give our time, our energy, and whatever else is needed, for someone else? Will we be unselfish, patient, generous, forgiving? That's cross-shaped love!

The cross is the key. The main thing for us is to love God and love other people: the cross is the key to that; the cross is the key to keeping the main thing the main thing. The cross opens up salvation for us; it opens up a sense of hope; it opens up a way to find courage when life is hard; it opens up good relationships. Don't believe me because you think this is a clever sermon; don't believe me because think I'm using wise words; don't believe me because think you should because I'm the minister. Open your heart and mind to the Spirit; pray that the Spirit will write this message into your heart so that you will believe Jesus, so that the gospel will shape your life, so that you will know the key to salvation, the key to hope, the key to life when it is hard, the key to good relationships.