

ISAIAH 58:9B-14
KEEP IT SIMPLE!

It is really very simple! Being a Christian, I mean. It is really very simple. I came across this again recently: “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!” For the Christian what is the main thing? For the church what is main thing? Is it to have a dress code – surely not! There was a time when you had to have a hat, or a suit and tie; but the culture has changed! Is it a building – there are conflicts and arguments aplenty across the church about which building and if it is not a particular building, then people will walk away from church! So it may seem as if the building is the main thing! What is the main thing – that we keep the rules? But what are the rules that we have to keep? Life gets so complicated at times: you have to make sure you’ve ordered the school meals? Have I cancelled the milk? When do I get my car serviced? How do I do the extra time at work that my boss wants? How do I collect my medication when I can’t walk to the chemist? It is such a complicated life!

Being a Christian is really very simple. Being a Christian is not about keeping the rules; Jesus told us that! We saw that earlier. Our dress code discussion was meant as a bit of fun, nothing to take seriously, and the opinions were deliberately over the top. When Jesus healed the woman on the Sabbath, He knew that there was a very simple choice to make: did He care for the woman or not? He cared, so He healed her. Being a Christian is very simple: love God, love other people. That’s all that counts and if you say to me, ‘how?’ then you’ve not quite grasped it. Today is not about ‘how’ but today is about the simple ideas at the heart of being a Christian: love God, love one another. In a very real sense the ‘how’ doesn’t matter. What matters is “love God, love other people!” If we have these in our hearts, the ‘how’ will take care of itself.

Isaiah 58 is, at first, all about the ‘how’ of religion and keeping the rules. The presenting issue is “fasting” – Israel had a practice of fasting, of denying themselves food for a time, covering themselves with ashes and wearing sackcloth, with the danger that they did it so that ‘everybody knows that I am fasting’. They had a book of rules about fasting. They have a complaint: “we are fasting, but God is not paying attention!” *“Why have...” (Isaiah 58:3)* They were keeping the rules of fasting, but they had a sense that God was ignoring them and they wanted to complain about it and they wanted to know why God was not paying attention to them. Here’s a reason; they had forgotten the simple things, to love God and to love other people. While they were fasting they were quarrelling with one another, they were fighting; they were exploiting others; their religious life was ending up in a brawl! The prophet reminds them to love God and love others. These two grand themes are in the piece that we read from the end of chapter 58.

If you were to write your own epitaph, what would it be? Spike Milligan wanted his gravestone to read “see, I told you I was ill!” What would you want to be known for? *“You will...” (Isaiah 58:12)* This is about a city being rebuilt, about a time when the city walls have been knocked down and the streets empty of houses and here is a people who will rebuild the walls and make the streets come alive again with people. It seems to me that this is about rebuilding a community, about rebuilding people’s lives in ways that are good, rebuilding the lives of those whose spirits have been broken and whose lives have been empty. Love other people and rebuild their lives and their community as they rebuild the city. Here’s what that might mean: *“If you...” (Isaiah 58:9f)* Love others means some things to be rid of: the pointing finger, accusation, criticism; other kinds of malicious talk, lies, gossip, interfering. To love others means, on the other hand, spending yourself for people who are hungry and speaking up for those who are oppressed. “Someone who loved others” is a brilliant epitaph and the community is rebuilt.

Who are the community builders in our community? How do we build a sense of community and family in church? Or are we just a collection of individuals and strangers? Do you know

the name of person in front of you, or behind you? Isaiah 58 told his people the 'how' for their time, but the 'how' for our time might be different. There are still people in the world for whom to love will mean to speak up on their behalf, millions who are exploited and treated unjustly, who are slaves, trafficked; they have no voice of their own and we need to be their voice in the world. There are people nearer to home who are hurting and need someone to notice them and hug them. The 'how' will be different for all of us, and you need to work out what the 'how' means for you, but all of us should have in our hearts love for others and a desire to care for others in need. Love is patient, kind, generous, forgiving – these are the qualities that we need to demonstrate towards one another. I discovered this week that the phrase “one-another” turns up nearly 60 times in the New Testament – someone said “we need to one-another one another” and notice, care for, and love one another. It is a simple principle – love others!

Love God. There was a time when every Christian in Scotland knew this question and knew the answer to it: “What is man’s chief end? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”. This is question one in the Shorter Catechism, that way of teaching that was so common in generations past. The main thing to keep as the main thing for us as Christians, for us as human beings, is to love God, to enjoy God! Isaiah 58 talks about the Sabbath and the way in which Israel was to use the Sabbath. For them, the Sabbath was the day of rest, when no work was to be done, but Isaiah puts a new feel to the Sabbath: “*If you...*” (*Isaiah 58:13f*) Far from being a religious encumbrance that stopped them from earning money, (“When can the Sabbath be over so that we can get back to the market!”) the Sabbath was a time to enjoy God, to love God and show love for God in worship, a time to find joy in the Lord and delight in the Lord and in His goodness. Far from being a chore, worship was to be an expression of their love for God and a delight in the way He has blessed His people.

Loving God is about far more than what we do here on a Sunday, but what we do here on Sunday is an expression of our love for and devotion to God, a way of expressing that love and devotion. What are we doing when we sing? We are using the words of the hymns and songs to say ‘thank you’ to God and expressing our delight in who God is and what He has done. “*Yours the glory and the crown, the high renown, the eternal name*” – these words give voice to a celebration of the glory and greatness of God, reminding us how worthy God is of praise. Our songs and singing celebrate God’s glory and His love, and celebrate how He has loved us in Jesus. We express our love and devotion in worship. So church-going: is it a religious duty that you feel you have to do or Sunday is somehow empty, you do it because you’ve done it all your life and feel you have to? Or is our church-going an expression of our love and devotion to God, a delight that helps us to find our joy in the Lord? Love God.

It is surprisingly simple: keep the main thing the main thing. The main thing for us is to love God and love one another. The people to whom the prophet was writing had forgotten these main things. They had their book of rules that said “here is how to fast!” but the rule book was useless. It was useless because they had forgotten to love God and love others. How do we know? Well, their fasting ended in a punch-up; the day before and the day after, they were exploiting people who were poor and were doing as they pleased with their lives. There was not much love there, either for God or for one another. Love God, love one another – these are the main things for us; these are the qualities that are to run deep in our hearts and are to be seen in the kind of people we are day by day.

God is building us into a community with Jesus at the centre. “*your light...*” (*Isaiah 58:10f*) These are pictures of God blessing His people: guiding, satisfying, strengthening them as they love Him and love others. This is a brilliant notion; this is who we are; this is what the Church is; we are a community of people with Jesus at the centre, people who love God together and people who love one another, the people whom God blesses and through whom His light shines in our world. One of the characteristics of much of life in our culture is its superficiality: our relationships with lots of people are skin deep, our news comes in sound-bites and any kind of depth is ‘boring’. Is the church superficial? It worship spiritual entertainment to keep us

happy? Or are we learning deep things from the Bible? Are there things that touch the very depths of our soul in worship? Are there ways to form deep and lasting relationships with one another in church? Do you know name of person sitting next to/behind/in front of you? Or do you want to know so that you can gossip? Or are your words “finger-pointing” words? Well, you say “preacher, we know these things; we’ve heard them before!” and you’d be right! But we also need to hear them again and again; then we need to do them!

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing! What is the main thing? To point out to someone that they’re not dressed ‘properly’, whatever ‘properly’ means? To finger-point at someone in criticism, complaint or accusation? All of this, the church is famous for! No, here is the main thing: to love God and love others. This is what matters: to have in our hearts a deep love and devotion for God, enjoying God, delighting in the God who has loved us. This is what matters: to have in our hearts a deep love for others, for their well-being, to care for others. This is not a ‘how-to’ guide: the ‘how’ will be different for everyone and will be different on different days of the week; you can work out the ‘how’ for yourselves. What matters most is that in our hearts there is this deep, lasting, life-long devotion to Jesus, taking delight in Him, and that there is a deep, lasting love for one another and for others. This is what matters; keep the main thing the main thing; love God, love one another. Let nothing get in the way; let nothing take their place; it really is very simple!