

## The Vision of the Gospel

2012 promises to be an interesting one on a whole number of levels. Just the briefest of looks at the international scene tell you that. In the Middle East we see Iran flexing her muscles, and the situation in Syria, not to mention many of the other Arab nations, far from sorted. In the Far East North Korea is as unstable as ever with both the economic and military might of China growing. In Europe the economic crisis is far from over, and in the US the presidential elections, which to an outsider seem incredibly divisive, are looming. And that's not even mentioning some of what is going on in Africa or South America. So, the world scene is going to offer plenty to occupy your attention over the coming year. But what about the private scene of your own personal life? Whether it's your studies, issues with the kids, your marriage, the need to find a job, or health and financial issues, things nearer to home than Iran will challenge you this year. Now some of those you can predict, they're just the normal stuff of life, and other stuff will come at you from out of the blue and grab your attention round the throat.

And the question is: how can you live with your eyes fixed on God when times are turbulent? How can you not give way to worry, how can you trust Jesus that He's working everything out for your good, when it may not feel like it? How, when there are going to be so many other things this year that try and take your gaze away from Jesus can you keep him in your sights and keep walking in his steps?

Well, as this is our first time together at the start of this year, I want us to consider how we can do that as individuals, and how we can do it together, as a church. How we can live with undistracted vision, seeing things the way God sees them. And we're going to do that by looking at a passage from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, where he sets out the vision he had for his ministry amongst them.

Now before we get there, to understand this passage, you need to understand a bit of what Corinth was like and what the church there was like. The city of Corinth was, still is, in Greece. It sits at the join between the mainland and the peninsula that sticks out at the bottom. And that meant that this city was a sort of international crossroads, between the east and the west of the Mediterranean area, and the north and the south. Everyone passed through Corinth, and some of them stayed, and so this city was like a melting pot of people, from different nationalities and different religious backgrounds. In other words, it's a bit like us here in Lausanne.

But hopefully, as a church, we're not *too* much like them because whilst we're admittedly a bit chaotic, this young church at Corinth was, frankly, in a mess. Firstly, they were split by factions. You had groups within the church going round saying 'I'm a follower of Paul' 'well I'm a follower of Apollos' 'well I'm a follower of Peter.' I read their books, I watch their DVDs, I go on their websites, and he's right and you guys are wrong. It would be like us dividing into groups saying well I'm a John MacArthur boy, well too bad because I'm for John Piper, well I've asked Tim Keller into my life and so on. And you even had the super-spiritual ones going round saying 'well I'm a follower of Christ.' We're the true Christians, you lot haven't even started. So, they were split by factions.

Then, their services were chaotic. Now, I know that as a church we take some getting your head round, later on we'll serve grape juice during communion whilst at every other opportunity the wine comes out, but at least here the pastor stays sober. In Corinth when they did communion it ended as a drunken feast.

And on top of that, they were dealing with some serious issues of moral failure in the church, with some people's lives in a total mess. Now, if your life is a mess and you haven't got it all together, join the club. You are welcome here. But just as in a hospital, a church should take people who start off sick and help them get better. They shouldn't get worse. But in Corinth some people were definitely getting worse, and with a few there was blatant sexual immorality going on.

So if they dramatised this church as a TV series and called it *Westlake Church Corinth: drink, divisions and debauchery*, it would go to the top of the ratings chart and you'd watch thinking 'it couldn't have been that bad, they must be exaggerating.' But sadly it was that bad.

And the passage we're going to look at this morning comes at the beginning of Paul's first letter to this church at Corinth. And as we read it I want you to see how he sets out his vision for his ministry, and the DNA he wanted to see established in the church. There were a thousand and one things to distract his attention, that needed dealing with, but we're going to see what he thought was most important, and then we're going to apply that to us.

## **1 Cor 1:10-2:5**

### **Paul's main thing: the gospel**

In planting this church at Corinth and in seeing it established, Paul encountered two alternative visions to the path he took this church on. Two groups of people on the sidelines, that shouted for his attention. v22: 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.'

As Paul moved from city to city, he would encounter Jews and Greeks trying to pull his ministry in certain directions, trying to get him to focus his ministry on stuff other than what he was called to. If they were going to pay him any attention they wanted him to pay attention to their agenda.

And on one side the Jews were constantly demanding signs. They wouldn't believe that God was at work unless they got to see signs and wonders. While on the other the Greeks wouldn't believe unless they saw wisdom. Not godly wisdom, but earthly wisdom, thinking and evaluating and seeing things the way the world sees them. Chattering about the latest ideas, thinking and talking and seeing the world with no perspective higher than their own. Debating religious ideas, but it never going beyond a superficial intellectual discussion, before moving onto the next thing.

And it seems likely that some of those same tensions were present in the church. Some of the Jewish Christians wanted more pizzazz, whilst some of the Greeks were dissatisfied with the lightweight-ness of it all and they wanted more meat, more talk.

But Paul didn't take either of those paths. He wasn't going to dance to either of those tunes. Instead he says, 'I preached the gospel, not in eloquent words, not with puffed up debating skills, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power.'

When faced with two alternative directions of travel, two alternative visions for this church, when feeling the pull from outside and even inside the church, to go this way or that, that if he did this he could appeal to these people, if he did that he could attract those people: Paul steered a different course, and he took the way of the Gospel in the power of God.

He refused to fall for either of these alternatives. Instead he made the gospel of Jesus Christ his main thing, and he wouldn't be deviated from it. Faced with a city needing to hear about Jesus. Faced with the issues this church faced. Faced with people's lives in need of sorting out, faced with a church where people were coming from multiple backgrounds and religious experiences, faced with a thousand and one things demanding his attention, Paul's answer, Paul's vision was the gospel.

That brings me to the second point:

### **The Gospel's main thing: Christ crucified**

If Paul's main thing was the gospel, the gospel's main thing is Christ crucified: v17: 'for Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest *the cross of Christ* be emptied of its power.' v22-23: 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach *Christ crucified*.' Chapter 2:1-2: 'When I came to you bothers I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech and wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except *Jesus Christ and Him crucified*.'

When Bill Clinton was fighting his first election for president, to keep him focused his aides stuck to his office door a sign, which read, 'it's the economy stupid'. That is what the central issue is, Bill. That is what will strike a cord with the people. That is what will win this election for you. It's the economy, stupid.

And when it comes to the gospel: it's Jesus, stupid. And just in case you're worried, the stupid refers to me. You see, for all of us, whether together as a church, or in our own individual lives, this year will throw up a thousand and one things to distract us and or divert our attention, or drag us off course, but the pre-eminent thing, what the gospel is all about, is Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. As one author (Keller) has wonderfully put it, the gospel can be summarised as 'You are so lost and flawed, so sinful, that Jesus had to die for you, but you are so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for you.'

And the vision for life that the Bible calls us to is one where Christ is our greatest satisfaction. That rather than running down the rabbit warrens of other things to give us meaning or security or identity, whether career or academic success or relationships, and rather than being lost in the chaos and traumas of life when those things are undermined, we find our security in the gospel, in God's love for

us as displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in finding Him the treasure and the pleasure of our lives.

But ask yourself, why does Paul put at the very centre of the Gospel the cross of Christ? Why the cross? Why this as the answer to everything Corinth, and you and I face in life. Well that's the third point:

### **Christ crucified: the power and the wisdom of God**

Paul tells us why in v23-24, 'but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block [literally, a scandal] to Jews [those who are looking for signs] and folly to Gentiles [those looking for wisdom]. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'. You want signs, Paul says, you want demonstrations of power, well Jesus Christ and the cross of Christ is the power of God. You want wisdom, you want to know how the world fits together, you want your questions answered, well Jesus Christ and him crucified is the wisdom of God.

Now, let's just take the briefest of looks at how the New Testament writers apply the gospel to our lives.

Firstly, the cross is the power and the wisdom of God because it is in Jesus dying in our place, and being raised again from the dead, that our sins are forgiven, and God's righteousness satisfied. Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' That means in this coming year as you keep Jesus in your gaze, you can know real, genuine, joy filled freedom from the crushing burden and the dark shadow of guilt and of your past. This year, Christ's love at the cross can be what defines you, and fills you with hope for the future, not your failure, past, present or future.

Secondly, it's at the cross that you see the full extent of just how much God loves you. In Romans 5:8 Paul says, 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' So, whatever circumstances you might face this year that would cause you to question His love for you, the cross is the power of God when you are tempted by feelings of being unloved, the burning light in the darkness that tells you you are loved beyond measure.

But that love is not a love to keep to your self. The gospel gives you the power to love those this year you would rather not love, the one's Jesus calls us to love. The apostle John wrote, (1 John 4:10-11), 'In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins [that is, what turns away God's wrath from us]. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.' You see, the cross doesn't just serve as our example of God loving his enemies, it is the power for us, through the Holy Spirit, to do the same. It is where grace has been shown to us and where we find grace to extend to others: so in those times in the coming year when your love is tested, the cross is the power and the wisdom of God to transform your relationships.

And no-where is that more true than in our marriages. For those of you who are married, I can virtually guarantee that this year will throw up new challenges.

And Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that it is Christ's love for the church, laying down His life for His bride, that is both the example and the power for husbands to love their wives with a self-sacrificing love and for wives to willingly submit to their husbands. As the gospel fills our hearts with the love of God for *ourselves*, we find the love to extend to our spouse who as sure as not is going to let us down, one way or another, in 2012. As one author (Keller) has said, the gospel is what our souls are meant to run on. If we are looking to our partner to fill our tank, we will inevitably be frustrated and disappointed. But as we allow Christ, through the cross, in the power of the Spirit, to fill our tanks with His love, we will find the resources to love our spouses whatever the year ahead throws at us.

Then the cross of Christ gives us both the example and the power to live the lives of self-sacrificing generosity, in 2012, that Jesus calls us to – with our time and money and resources. In 2 Cor 8 and 9, Paul says it is knowing 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' that opens our hands in sacrificial giving. When we see how God has given himself for us, how can we hold on to our stuff when others are in need?

Then the cross is the ground on which we can find God's power for physical healing, not fully in this life, that waits for the one to come, but it is the ground on which to stand and pray for each other, because by His stripes we are healed (Matt 8:17). It is where Satan is defeated, where his hold on lives is broken, where he is made a public spectacle and triumphed over in the cross (Col 2:15). It is where the power of sin in our lives is broken: because Jesus died, we died and counting ourselves dead to sin, it doesn't have a grip on us any longer, so when temptation comes you don't have to give in, you can find the power of God to start making right choices. And having been forgiven and declared not guilty, and reconciled to the Father, the cross becomes the fountainhead for the Holy Spirit to be poured into our lives, to give us the power to live the new life that is ours in Christ.

That, and a whole host of other reasons, is why Paul makes so much of the Gospel. That is why he says in Gal 6:14 that he will not boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. I'm not going to let anything drag me away from this, I will only boast in the cross.

That was Paul's vision for his ministry and for the church at Corinth. When there was all this other stuff competing for their attention, he called them back to Jesus and His cross and resurrection.

And let's finish by bringing this home to us.

### **Rooted in the gospel, radical transformation**

If you didn't know it by now, that's the vision we have for our church here. That each of us would be so rooted in the gospel, and the gospel so rooted in us that it would lead to radical transformation of our lives.

Now, just imagine a magnificent oak tree. How does that tree stay standing? Because it's rooted to the ground. And when the storm comes and everything

that isn't tied down gets smashed about, the tree bends with the wind but when the storm's passed, it's still there. It's rooted. And Jesus said that the wise man is the man who builds his house, who roots his life on the rock of Jesus' words, on the gospel. And in that parable of the wise and foolish builders that Jesus tells, both men's lives get hit by the storm. So, being rooted in the gospel and what Jesus has done for you at the cross, won't make you immune to the stuff of life that will come your way. But it will mean you can stand when it comes.

But the tree doesn't just get stability from being rooted. It gets fed and watered and nourished the same way. Now, I've told this story plenty of times, but a mother once brought her baby to see me because he was bright orange. He was glowing, and she wanted to know what was wrong with him. Well it was a pretty simple diagnosis. I asked her, what do you give him for breakfast. Mashed carrots. And for lunch: mashed carrots. And for dinner? Mashed carrots. This boy was a living, crawling, human carrot. And you will become what you feed your soul on. Feed your soul on trash and it becomes trashy. Feed yourself on the gospel by rooting yourself in what Christ has done for you and your soul will thrive and bear fruit.

That is the vision we have for us as a church, and for us as individuals. That whatever this year brings – the joys and the trials, by rooting ourselves in all that Christ has done for us, and living it out in the power of the Spirit, we might thrive and grow in him, whatever the weather.