

THE BIG PICTURE
NEW COVENANT, NEW PEOPLE

There is a gold one on a chain around the neck of the woman who sits opposite you on the bus or the train; there's a lapel badge on the jacket of the man you pass on the street; there's a neon sign on the street in the city of South Korea; Arthur Blessit carried a huge wooden one across the USA in the 60's; there's a huge one standing at the top of Riccarton Mains Rd; there's one embroidered on the front of the pulpit, and another carved in the font and the lectern. I'm talking about the cross – the universally recognised symbol of Christian faith. Wherever you go, the cross will tell you that Christians are here, whether painted on a staircase in Cairo or rising from the top of the great cathedrals across the world. The cross is central to Christian faith, Jesus and Him crucified stand at the centre of the Christian faith; the cross is, literally, the crucial part of God's great plan to bless the world.

We're telling the whole story of the Bible in eight weeks: God created the world and it was good, but sin entered and we're caught up in the tension between this good world/bad world. All the way through the Old Testament, people lived by faith then drifted away from God and forgot to love Him. Last week, God Himself came into this goodworld/bad world in the shape of Jesus, the Son of God, God made human for us. Jesus is the teacher, Jesus the healer, Jesus the Son of God, but we never really understand Jesus properly and fully till we get to the cross and the resurrection. All four gospels tell His story; all of them spend more time on the last week of Jesus' life than anything else; all of them concentrate on the stories of His death and resurrection; in that very simple way they tell us how important the cross is. We gather round the communion table today to share bread and wine together and even this is cross-centred: the Last Supper took place on the night before Jesus died and Jesus invested the bread and wine with meaning that is all about His death and resurrection.

We read just a snippet of the story; Mark simply tells us what happened on the day Jesus died. There is the story of the man who helped him carry the cross; the soldiers divided up His clothes; it was 9am when He was crucified; Pilate put a note above the cross saying "*King of the Jews*"; two criminals were crucified with Him; people made fun of Him and hurled insults at Him; finally everything went dark at midday and Jesus cried out "*My God...*" (v34); He died and the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The other gospels tell us other bits to add more, but Mark tells us simply and succinctly the story of Jesus and His cross, the story of Good Friday. On the Sunday, He is raised and His friends met Him, spoke to Him, shared breakfast with Him; they realised that He is alive. Ever since, the Church has proclaimed Jesus as the Crucified and risen Saviour.

A new covenant – All the way through the story, God is making covenants with His people. A covenant is promises, but with bite, with commitment. God made a covenant with Abram to bless him, his family and the whole world; He made a covenant with Moses that Israel be God's people and that they obey God; He made a covenant with David that God will be faithful to His promises; lastly this new covenant is made in Jesus and the bread and wine are tangible, taste-able evidences of God's commitment to bless us. It is a new covenant, and a better covenant because it is based on better promises. God has committed Himself to forgive us our sins, to give us peace and hope for our hearts, to be with us everywhere and always. This new covenant is established when

Jesus died and rose again; because Jesus died, these covenant promises are possible; because He is raised these covenant promises are sure, certain and everlasting.

The relationship between God and the world is shaped by the cross. We approach God in faith because God has loved us and Jesus has died on a cross; He is a God who shares our suffering and is well-called a "Man of sorrows!" We find God's blessing through faith in Jesus and God's grace is poured out into our hearts. God has committed Himself to bless us and our world and we come to Him as people of faith, empty-handed, looking for Him to love us and bless us and give us all that we need. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds his readers of the basics of the gospel; these are the Christian basics, that "*Christ...*" (1 Cor 15:3ff) and having done that, he then reminds them of their own story: "*By the...*" (15:10) We are new people by the grace of God; we are the people we are because of God's grace. God's great plan to bless the world, all of these promises and covenants that have gone before – this whole plan is complete in Jesus', death and resurrection and the promises are ours by the grace of God, for faith. The cross shapes our relationship with God. It also should shape our relationships with one another, that we see each other as people who share in this grace together. The cross also should shape our self-understanding, that each of us is a person valued by God enough to be someone for whom Jesus has died.

We Celebrate Jesus, crucified and risen. He is the Saviour of the world. In Him all the promises of God are a glorious 'Yes'. When Jesus died and was raised He did everything to save us and is able to save us forever. The cross is the power of God to change people's lives, to make us new people. "He died that we might be forgiven." All of this is God's gift to us; we have done nothing to deserve this blessing, but God's grace makes us the people that we are; God has committed Himself to bless the world in this way and nothing can take this away from us. The Church goes through dark days; faith is sorely tried and tested at times; doubts and questions creep in. So in the bread and wine we remember Jesus, crucified and risen, and we remember that He did this for us. So take to heart these most precious promises all over again. "*I have...*" (Gal 2:20)