

Beginnings are important. First impressions - first experiences - whether in our personal or professional lives, are the most important interactions. And not days or hours of information, but minutes and seconds. Researchers have learned that our assessments of one another - of our surroundings and situations - happen very quickly. We have learned to trust our gut. Maybe that is why first impression stories feature so often in Scripture.

Abram hears voices. Jacob wrestles with a stranger. Joseph dreams dreams. Moses sees a bush that burns without being damaged. And Isaiah...Isaiah see the Temple shake - fire, smoke, angels; the full meal deal. Our friend Paul has also had a memorable 'first contact' with the divine. And like the stories of his ancestors, it is an encounter that leaves him changed. Blinded, for a time, but fundamentally changed - to the soles of his feet - and this moment with Jesus sets Paul on a brand new path.

Sure, he's a man of faith. He knows what he knows - rituals, rules, respect for the traditions and habits of his people - but Jesus as put another proposition in his mind. Messiah that suffers; a king who serves; this is the movement that Paul joins in its infancy, and helps to define into a unique expression of faith.

We have, in the last several weeks, jumped into the thick of an argument that Paul offers to those who are struggling to share a common purpose. Paul has led these folks to an understanding of who Jesus was and what he stood for. They have heard and believed - been baptized and celebrated in worship and at table. But their experience of Jesus has been...second-hand.

Maybe that's why they are divided - why they can't yet agree on how to celebrate the supper - or what sort of worship best honours their crucified Lord...and why Paul keeps coming back to first things.

We have heard Paul's explanation of spiritual gifts - his metaphor for living in faithful community. We heard last week his elegant argument for love over all gifts. (and we cleverly avoided chapter 14, with all its talk about tongues and the silence of women) Paul is a man of structured habits, and he is trying to offer these followers of Jesus a structure to guide them. But none of it matters if the first principles are ignored or unappreciated. On Wednesday mornings, we've gone back to the beginning of this letter, and discovered that in the opening pages of the letter, all Paul wants to talk about is Christ Crucified. First things first. For this crucifixion is either everything or nothing at all - and to Paul and the infant church, it is everything.

For one, it is very real. Enemies of the state are still being crucified as Paul writes, so the terror and brutality of crucifixion is fresh in the mind of his audience. So too are the stories of Jesus. Not yet formalized or organized into anything we would recognize as Scripture, but they were making the rounds. The way Jesus took faith and made it personal - his talk of the nearness of the kingdom and the familiar way Jesus described God; not to mention his willingness to extend God's welcome beyond the usual boundaries. Paul speaks his experience of Jesus into a world that is ready to hear something new and fresh and hopeful and for Paul, that begins with the cross.

He admits (here in chapter 15) that for all his ideas about order and decency in worship and relationship, his is just one voice among many. He describes himself as the least in a long list of those who have encountered the risen Christ. And in spite of his blinding revelation on the roadside, he offers them the rough and ready origins of this adventure. "...that Christ died for our sins...and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with scripture. The sights and sounds of Paul's conversion experience are measured by the brutal truth of the cross.

The cross had been (until this moment) a means of silencing the voices of opposition to the status quo. It was a tool used by the powerful to maintain their power. But when Paul talks of the power of the cross, it is because he has seen one power overthrown by another. It took Jesus death to affect that change, and Jesus resurrection to confirm that things need never be the same again.

Paul's proclamation might seem full of rules and wild, winding logic. His arguments and his descriptions of process can be tough to follow. But he is trying to live into a new way of being - he finds himself in a world where power has been redefined; a world with God in its midst. And he wants to be certain that we know where it all started.

Paul didn't imagine his would be the last word on the subject of worship, or order, or Spiritual practice. But he did recognize that God had opened a fresh conversation in Jesus, and that - on the cross - a new language of faith has been spoken - a language that Jesus still translates for us today.