

## 19/11/17 – Risk Taking

I wonder what your attitude is towards risk-taking. Some of you might be naturally comfortable with a degree of risk in your lives, others may have a much more cautious approach to risk-taking. In most situations I think I'm relatively risk-averse, but quite often I do like to take a risk if I think the potential benefits are worth it. The American Management Consultant, Peter Drucker, once said this about risk: "People who don't take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year. People who do take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year."

Also commenting on the place of risk in the world, Mark Twain said this: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." Risk-taking and a willingness to speculate in order to accumulate are often terms referred to in the context of financial matters.

We only need to cast our minds back to the financial crisis of 2008 to see how the effects of high-risk loans and investments almost brought the whole of the western economic system to its knees. And then of course, there are the massive economic risks to us here in Britain if and when we leave the EU. On the face of it, our gospel reading this morning seems to suggest that God rewards the risk-takers and punishes the cautious. It's quite easy to read it that way, and you'd be forgiven for doing so. But as is so often the case, Jesus is using this story to make people sit up and pay attention. This story, and others like it, are parables – it's not an allegory. Parables are stories with a meaning and what we have to do is to enjoy the story and dig below the surface for its meaning. Allegories on the other hand, have a more of a direct correlation between the story and the real or spiritual world.

If this story were an allegory, you might be left thinking 'Surely that's not what God is like is it?' This Master seems greedy, unjust, vindictive and harsh. Is Jesus really saying that this is what God is like? Here is someone who gives the least to the least-able servant who then hides it. He then has what little was entrusted to him taken away from him as a punishment, and given to someone else (who already has plenty), before being thrown out into the darkness. Does that really sound like the God we think we know?

But of course this story is a parable – a story designed to paint a picture in order to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. The characters are not necessarily representative of God and His servants. But the point of the story is! So to help us understand this, I'd like to invite you just for a moment to put yourself in the shoes of the owner. You decide to go on a journey and so you give your wealth into the care of your slaves. You naturally give the least to the lazy untrustworthy slave, and the most to the hard working and reliable ones. On your return, you summon your slaves in order to settle the accounts. Just as you thought, the lazy, untrustworthy slave hasn't done anything with what you entrusted to him, even though it was only a little. So you take it from him and give it to the reliable one who you know will look after it well. So what do you do with the lazy servant who, to cover his own backside, has put around scurrilous stories about you? You sack him and put him out of your household. All fairly practical really – once you no longer see the Master as God!

So what is Jesus saying to us in this parable? Well, very often the talents in this parable, (or the bags of gold in the NIV translation) are interpreted to be the gifts and skills that God has given us, and that is certainly one way of reading it. God does give us gifts, both natural and economic, which he wants us to use well and not to bury. And maybe God does want to encourage us to use these gifts that He gives us and not to squander them, be they gifts of money, intellect, or inter-personal skills.

But I would like to suggest that this parable isn't actually about taking risks with money or using our God-given gifts and skills, but about the good news, God's message given to the Jewish people. God had given the good news, the knowledge of God, to the Jewish people and some of them had 'buried it' - kept it for themselves and squandered it. For the good news to become productive it had to be taken away from them and given to those who would do something with it. The message they were called to share was that God had made a covenant with them. He had chosen them through Abraham and blessed them and revealed Himself to them. In turn they were called to bring this blessing, this salvation, to the world. "Through you all the world will be blessed", God had said to Abraham. And to the clear frustration of Jesus, this simply wasn't happening. They had squandered the knowledge of God on themselves.

Far from taking a risk for the sake of the good news, they had instead 'buried' it, not to destroy it or keep it hidden, but to try to keep it intact. But just like the Manna in the wilderness, the longer they kept it the more rotten

it became and the more it stank. And so I would suggest that Jesus told this parable, not to encourage the reward of the wealthy at the cost of the poor, but to encourage the Jews to share in the good news that had been given to them.

And this parable is for us too. Have we, who have been entrusted with the good news, also squandered it and failed to share it with others? And will God call us to account? Does this parable perhaps teach us that we must take risks for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the good news? Does it not call us to “throw off the bowlines, to sail away from the safe harbour of our comfortable lives, and to catch the trade winds in our sails” as we seek to live out that calling to share the good news; to BE the good news in our lives?

For us the good news is that God loves the world and has indeed blessed it and reconciled Himself to the world through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus. The task of the Church, OUR task, is to call the world to be reconciled to God, to be His ambassadors, proclaiming His love both in word and deed. In short, our task is to share the good news that has been given to us, and that is a risky thing for us to do.

Let us pray:

Loving Lord, help us to take risks for the sake of the good news.  
When we are cautious and careful, help us to be daring and decisive.  
When we are fearful make us faithful.  
Help us to look to your strength, and not to our weaknesses,  
to your riches, not to our poverty –  
that we may fulfil your hopes for us, to your glory and our joy.  
Amen.

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[Return to home page](#)