

MATTHEW 25:14-30
FAITH – RISKY BUSINESS!

Have you ever taken a risk? Some people break out in cold sweat at the very mention of the word 'risk'. There is a whole industry now built around 'risk management' and if you've never come across it, it is far more complicated than you could imagine: it is designed to calculate the risk of an organisation losing its way, for example, the church not being able to carry on, having no resources and then what actions might you take to make sure that doesn't happen, to minimise the risk. Have you ever taken a risk? You might be sitting there thinking "never! I've never taken a risk in my life; I like my life to be safe and secure and comfortable!" Well, then you've never crossed the road, especially Lanark Rd, especially in the dark; that is full of risk! Well then, you've never been a parent because there are all kinds of risk about being a parent, most of all that children wring your heart because you love them with every fibre of your being. You've never climbed a hill, or gone on a cruise, or stepped on a bus or a train; you've never driven a car. Risk is part of life; the only way to live a life free from risk is to stay at home all day and meet nobody, and even then you run the risk of tripping on the carpet! Risk is part of life.

A few years ago, someone asked the question: how do you spell 'faith'? The answer he gave was R-I-S-K! There is risk attached to being a Christian! When you put your trust in someone there is risk attached; there is good evidence for trusting Jesus, but there is also an element of risk. Learning to follow Jesus and shape our lives by Jesus' teaching and example is a big adventure, but there is an element of risk involved as well – it might take you out of your comfort zone, asking questions of you that you didn't expect and find challenging and awkward; it might suggest that the way you live is different to the way your friends live their lives, with different values, and that might be risky - how will your friends react? Churches make choices about all sorts of things that are risky, taking new initiatives, and we have no way of knowing whether they will work or not; do we take the risk and invest time, effort, and money in something, or stay safe and gradually wither and die? There is a choice to make; is there a risk to take?

Jesus told a story, the centre of which is a choice: to take a risk or to stay safe? It is a story about a man who was going away on a journey and would come back but his servants did not know when. Jesus is coming back to the world in power and glory and the disciples are to be ready! This story has same theme to it but different lesson to teach. Being ready is about responsible activity, doing things that the master can see and taking a risk! Every investment has an element of risk attached; the small print says that the value of your investments can go down as well as up! This is a story about the investment of time, effort, energy, and faith in an enterprise called the kingdom of God, with Jesus at the centre and the question: what we do with that? Anything? Nothing?

The master was going away on his journey. Before he went, he left some of his property entrusted to his servants. There are three servants in the story and to the first servant he entrusted five talents; to the second, two talents and to the third he entrusted one talent. The talent is a sum of money: today it would be worth thousands of pounds in spending power, so the master is entrusting a great deal to these servants. Then he left on his journey. These three servants each had a choice to make: "What will I do with this trust? What will I do with my masters' money?" On a couple of occasions, we've done something like this: the last time I gave out £1 and the challenge was to use that £1 to make some more money and we sent what we made to our friends in Cambodia: some people made biscuits, or cakes; some people invested in some washing up liquid and a bucket and washed a few cars;

people did all kinds of things to turn my £1 into lots more money. The same challenge is in this story: what to do?

The servant with five talents went off and made five more; the servant with two talents went off and made two more. We're not told what they did and remember this is simply a story that Jesus told to make a point; these servants didn't exist in exactly this way. They doubled their master's money by putting that money to work; remember investments can go down as well as up, so there must have been some risk that they might lose their master's money by putting it to work. The risk paid off, the money doubled. The third servant: "*went off...*" (*Matthew 25:18*) Later he tells us why: "*I knew...*" (*Matthew 25:24f*) Fear paralysed him; the fear of losing his master's money made him dig a hole in the ground and hide it; what he had been given, he simply wanted to keep safe and secure and so he hid it in the ground, and he achieved nothing.

The master came back; it was the day of reckoning: Each of the servants is called to give account of themselves. The first brought his five talents and the five more that he had achieved in the time when the master was away: "*Well done...*" (*Matthew 25:21*) The same happened with the man who had been given two talents and who came back with two more: "*Well done...*" (*Matthew 25:23*) But then the man with the one talent came and explained to his master what he'd done and why: "*Master, I knew...*" (*Matthew 25:24f*) The master was angry; he called him wicked and lazy and described him being thrown out for his laziness; he called him 'worthless'. So why was the master angry? Because the servant had done nothing; he had allowed himself to be paralysed with fear and had done nothing. He simply played safe, hid the money away and did nothing! There were Christians in the first century who believed that Jesus would come back and soon, so they did nothing; they sat back and waited for the kingdom to come. There is nothing here to suggest that Jesus approved of that inaction!

The story is to challenge us to be ready for Jesus' return. What does that mean? Should we be sitting back, "waiting"? This story suggests that to be ready is to be engaged in responsible activity, putting to good use the 'talents' that Jesus has given to us. For us, the talents are privileges and opportunities of the kingdom of God, but let me tease that out little bit. Jesus says "follow me" and that is both a privilege and an opportunity: it is a privilege in the sense that He promises to us a life lived in His company, that He is present with us everywhere we go even if unseen; it is a privilege in the sense that the grace and peace He brings to the world are gifts He gives to us to bring added value to life. This is an opportunity in the sense that Jesus challenges us to live our life in His ways: we are to love God and take the opportunity to worship; we are to love other people and take the opportunity to care for people in need; we are to be part of the church and take the opportunity to serve Jesus in the life of the Church.

On Tuesday evening I met with the seven people who are going to become elders in our congregation in two weeks time. The first thing we did was to ask them how they felt. They spoke about the privilege they feel about being asked to take on this leadership role within the life of the church and how privileged they feel to be given that opportunity. But they also spoke of the sense of responsibility and that there is something scary about the size of that privilege. To their credit, while they all see the size of the task and all feel somewhat inadequate, they have all taken the risk to say 'yes' to the question and will all be ordained on the 15th. There are times when the privileges and opportunities of the kingdom present themselves and we feel scared, which is Ok, but then we do nothing because that fear paralyses us so we hide from the opportunity, we bury our talent in the ground and do nothing.

What are "talents" for us?

The gospel itself is a talent. Jesus has entrusted the gospel to His church for safe keeping; we are to keep the truth of the gospel and not lose it. But the gospel is not just for keeping safe, it is for sharing with other people; the gospel is for passing on to the next generation, so parents tell their children about Jesus and what Jesus has done; so we teach our children and young people the Bible; so we tell our friends what we believe when the question arises in conversation. We have the privilege of believing something incredibly important about what God has done for us in Jesus; we have the opportunity to pass that on to someone else.

Our gifts and skills are talents; we even use the word in that sense. The privilege we have is to use our gifts and skills to serve Jesus. So many Christians who are musical, who either play an instrument or sing, speak about how privileged they feel to be able to use their musical ability to worship God and lead others in praise. You might have people skills to listen to needy people; or financial skills to run the business side of church life or some kind of enterprise that builds the kingdom of God and cares for needy people; or property skills, or admin skills, or preaching skills. There are all kinds of gifts and skills that we have and we have the privilege of giving these skills to serve Jesus and we have the responsibility to take the opportunities when they arise. We have the privilege of giving money, glad to respond to God's goodness to us, the privilege of investing in the kingdom of God at work in the world, and the opportunity to serve God by our giving.

Here are privileges and opportunities of the kingdom of God: what will we do? There are two choices: to go with these privileges and opportunities or not? To take a risk? To achieve something in the life of God's kingdom, in the life of Church, in the life of the community? Or are we paralysed by fear and hide our talent in a hole in the ground and do nothing? Yes, there is a risk in trusting Jesus, in following Jesus, in serving Jesus, but it is a risk well worth taking! Don't let your fears paralyse you; otherwise you will do nothing and achieve nothing. Responsible activity is about taking hold of the privileges and opportunities of the kingdom of God - what could be better?