

MATTHEW 25:14-30  
RISK-AVERSE CHURCH?

What are the riskiest jobs? According to a piece in the online Daily Telegraph they are: builder, bin-man, farmer, miner, shopkeeper, mechanic, teacher, librarian and estate agent. This is based on the number of people killed and injured in 2012-13; so these are described as Britain's most dangerous jobs. Some of these jobs, you might expect to be dangerous, but others will take you by surprise perhaps. The Health and Safety Executive collates the figures of people injured and killed at work and these come out as the most dangerous jobs. If you do one of these jobs, you might not want to go to work; you take a risk every time you go to work. People talk about it being dangerous to just cross road, but not so risky as you might think; there is an actuarial calculation that tells you just how risky, though if you cross the road when speaking on your phone or texting your best friend, the risk level goes up significantly as the young woman who crossed the road in front of my car discovered; I saw her coming!. Life is full of risk and for some just going to work every day means a certain amount of risk!

A few years ago, Russell McLarty led a Kirk-Session conference for us. He spelled faith as R-I-S-K! He talked about faith as taking risks: we take the risk to trust God and risk that God will keep His promises; the more we know of God and His faithfulness, then that sense of risk becomes smaller, because we know that God is faithful. We take a risk to serve God, unsure of our ability and strength to complete something we start; then we discover that God helps us and we are able and the risk pays off. The Church is at a tipping-point of risk for its future in Scotland: there are choices to make – do we stick with the tried and tested ways of working that may not be fruitful anymore, or do we take a risk to try something new and different, risky because we're not sure that it will work either? The Church is one of the most risk-averse organisations there is; we will stay with what we know long after it has stopped being effective because it is way we've always done it. There are all kinds of examples of that and even those who profess to be risk-takers and advocates of change, when push comes to shove, stick with what they know, and are averse to risk!

The Parable of the talents is a picture of people who are faced with that choice – “how much risk am I prepared to take?” Jesus tells the story of a man who is going away and who gives each of his servants a sum of money to look after; he entrusted his property to them, a trust to make best of and look after his money to the best of their ability. They weighed money then and the talent was a weight, perhaps about 75lbs; it is not always easy to say “how much?” and in a sense it doesn't matter. Each servant is given a different sum of money to look after, depending on the level of trust and is expected to fulfil the trust placed in them by their master. One is given five talents, another two talents, and the third is given one talent. The question they have to wrestle with is “how much am I prepared to risk?” In using his five talents, the servant might well have lost it all, if his business enterprise went pear-shaped. The servant with the two talents ran the same risk, losing it on the chance that he might double it? The third servant was not prepared to take any risk whatsoever; he hid his talent in the ground; frightened to take the risk; it cost him dearly, while the other two were lauded and praised by their master and given more.

There was a day when they were called to account for the way they had exercised this trust and responsibility. Two of the servants came with the money their master had left in their charge plus the same amount again: they had understood what he wanted, and they had acted on it; they had exercised this trust in a good way and were well-rewarded. “*Well done...*” (*Matthew 25:21*) They were given more responsibility by their master, a sign of his increased trust in them. The third man came with his money intact; he hadn't understood what was being asked of him; he didn't grasp the nature of his responsibility and so he just hid money, to keep it safe for a rainy day, but that was not what his master expected; he did nothing and the master called him “*Wicked, lazy...*” (*Matthew 25:26*) Which servant would you rather be in this story?

How do we understand this story? It is not, ultimately, a story about money; money features in the story, but that is not the key to the story. It is not a story about our gifts and talents; that is an unfortunate coming together of words in the English language – talent just happens to be the translation of the word for money as well as being a word meaning our gifts and abilities, our talents; but that is not what the story is about either. The story is about our responsibilities and how we exercise these responsibilities in the light of Jesus being Lord of our lives and in the light of the Lord coming again to the world. We have all sorts of responsibilities and will look at some in a second; how do we exercise these responsibilities? Do we take them and work at them, or do we simply ignore them and do nothing? Are we prepared to take risks or do we play safe all of time?

Jesus says *“follow me”*. That is the basic responsibility of the Christian. We are called to follow Jesus. To take that seriously means listening to Jesus and finding out what kind of person He wants me to be. There is a certain amount of risk involved: being a disciple might mean I have to change the way I think, the way I speak, the way I behave, the kind of person that I am and I’m not sure that I want to change. Jesus’ ways are different from my ways and to be His disciple I need to listen to Him and learn from Him. Or, I can ignore that responsibility and do nothing about it; I can continue to admire Jesus from a distance, from the side-lines and think that He is a nice man and a good teacher, but simply not let anything about Him touch my life. In a sense, Jesus is buried in a hole in the ground and I do nothing with Him. How have I exercised my responsibility as a disciple? Have I followed Jesus or not?

Jesus says *“you are...”* (Matthew 5:14) We have a responsibility to reflect Jesus to the world around us and let the world see Jesus in us. The way by which we do that is to put Jesus’ teaching into practice and be the kind of people He wants us to be: to be humble, self-controlled, patient, loving, faithful. We stand up for justice in the world, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable. That is our responsibility to Jesus and to the world, to let Jesus be seen in the world when we reflect something of His life in our life. But that is risky: we risk being laughed at if we put our heads above the parapet; we risk getting it wrong and being accused of being hypocrites; we risk making a fool of ourselves in public if we make ourselves different from the crowd. It is much easier to do nothing with this; it is easier to blend in with the crowd and to have the values and standards that everyone else has and so we hide our light under a basket and pretend that we know nothing of Jesus, we’re just the same as everyone else. The world is a poorer place if we let our light be hidden!

Jesus says *“go and...”* (Matthew 28:19) We have a responsibility to tell others the story of Jesus, to share our faith with other people we meet, with people in our family, with our friends, so that they can learn to follow Jesus as well. As the church, we have a responsibility to the next generation coming along that there is a church for them to be part of, to keep the flame burning, to pass on the gospel so that the next generation can hear it and believe Jesus; as someone told us about Jesus, so we have a responsibility to pass on this treasure to those coming after us. But that is risky; it takes courage to share your faith with someone else; you don’t know how they will react; they may love you for it, but they may laugh at you and hold you forever in contempt. They may not know of your Christian faith and you may go down in their estimation!

Being a disciple is the adventure of a lifetime: we become people we’d never dreamed of becoming, achieving things we’d never have imagined achieving, as we set out to follow Jesus. We learn so much about ourselves and about Jesus and about life that we could never learn in any other way. We learn to be the best kind of person, to engage with the Bible and its wisdom, to learn to pray; it is a great adventure that starts when Jesus says *“follow me!”* Being the light of the world is a humbling experience as we reflect Jesus to the world around us, as we care for people, as we care for the world and people respond and react to what they see of Jesus in us. Making disciples is a hugely rewarding experience as we see other people engage with Jesus and involve themselves in the life of the church and the rewards of seeing

people begin to appreciate Jesus for the first time and grow in their faith is something that money can't buy.

These are our Jesus-given responsibilities. The question is what are we going to do with them. They involve risk! Do we take the risk and take up these responsibilities, or hide them in the ground and do nothing? Responsibilities make a difference: we will be the people that Jesus wants us to be "*Well done...*" (*Matthew 25:21*) We will show the world what Jesus is like; we will tell others Jesus' story so that others will find faith; we will keep the light of the gospel burning in Scotland; there will be a church for the next generation to be part of; our capacities to serve will grow and become stronger. To achieve all of that involves taking risks: there are personal risks for each of us individually; there are risks for us to take as a congregation as we try to shape the future, not simply doing the same things over and over again; there are risks for us to take as a church nationally, making choices that will keep the gospel alive and will keep the church serving the people of Scotland for generations to come. Are we risk-averse? Or are we living up to the responsibilities that Jesus gives us? "*Well done...*" (*Matthew 25:21*)