

“A RISKY BUSINESS”
Hebrews 11:1-40

The late Donald Coggan, after he'd retired as Archbishop of Canterbury, was travelling down to his home in Winchester on the train and got into conversation with a student who was sitting opposite him. When they arrived at their destination, the student helped Dr Coggan off the train with his luggage and then walked off down the platform with a cheery, *“Take care, then”*. There was a bit of a queue at the exit barrier and the elderly clergyman caught up with the young man. They had another brief conversation and exchanged a few more niceties, before the student picked up his bag and said once again, *“Well, take care, then.”* *“No,”* replied Dr Coggan. *“Don't take care – take risks!”*

That's more or less the complete opposite of what our culture tells us today. We live in a society which does everything it possibly can to minimise risks. For an increasing number of activities, you have to fill in a risk assessment form before you can get going. School activities have been greatly restricted because of this. Children generally are treated in ways which minimise any possible risk, however small. The ways in which their freedom and development are constrained these days has a great deal to do with media hysteria over high-profile abuse cases, when in actual fact crimes against children are lower now than they were in the 1960s. Older people often find themselves living in a prison of fear and anxiety because of perceived risks. We try to build safer and safer cars, trains, planes. And people panic when they hear reports on our news media of the possibility of being hit by an asteroid in twenty years time – the possibility being one in several million, but you can never be too careful, can you? (It has to be said that the possibility of winning the Lotto is actually more remote, but that's another sermon!)

Partly, of course, there is a real fear deep within us of danger. But most of the time there is no real danger. Partly, we are afraid of taking risks because of the fear of failure – something that perhaps lies at the root of Jesus' parable about the three men who were given money to look after by their master and the third one refused to invest it in case it went wrong. And partly there is an enormous fear of litigation on the part many organisations and individuals. Following the pioneering example of our friends across the Atlantic, lawyers are desperate to get their hands on cases of people who have had an accident and want to make a bit of money out of it – though, of course, nowhere near as much as the lawyers expect to make out of it. Hence the plethora of notices that appear all over the place warning you not to do this, that or the other because of the remote possibility that you might explode or start a world war.

And, of course, because the way in which we live out our Christian faith is so often shaped by the prevailing trends of the culture in which we find ourselves, we end up developing a risk-free religion, settling down into a form of discipleship that is comfortable and predictable, where our biggest anxiety is

about stepping out of line. In a sermon he preached a couple of years ago at the Churches Together in England national forum which I attended, and which has always stuck in my mind, David Coffey, then General Secretary of the Baptist Union and President of CTE, said, “*Beware of a religion which is concerned only with not doing anything wrong.*” If you’ve read any of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, you’ll know that that is the religion of the Pharisees – always ensuring that you do the right things at the right time in the right order and that you never, ever step out of line.

And that kind of religion – comfortable, predictable, nice, risk-free – is certainly not what Jesus Christ calls us to. The kind of spirituality or faith or religion or whatever word you want to use which Jesus calls us to is messy and untidy. It involves talking to the wrong people, keeping the wrong company, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable back further and further. It’s the kind of stuff those edgy organisations like Christian Aid and Greenbelt are always accused of doing, and which we like to huff and puff about. It involves picking up your cross every single day in the knowledge that the only people who ever carried a cross were those who were going to be nailed to it. That is very scary. And it’s particularly scary when you’ve managed to survive into middle age or beyond and you don’t have the same energy and enthusiasm that you once did, when you feel that this is a time to take your ease after all the risky and iconoclastic things you did in your earlier years.

Which is why we read the passage from *Hebrews 11* this morning. This is a well-known chapter about the “Heroes of Faith”, the men and women who are held up by the author of this letter as examples for the rest of us to follow when it comes to our faith – to our risky faith. At various times in the past (mainly on Sunday evenings and at Church Night) we’ve looked at the individual stories of some of these people, but here we have a roll call of people who took risks, who didn’t bother with insurance policies or risk assessments or public image consultants or spin doctors – in short, who had faith in God and were therefore prepared to do whatever he seemed to be asking of them. And the list could be extended now with the names of many others – Thomas, St Chad, Martin Luther, John Wesley, C T Studd, Gladys Aylward, Martin Luther King Jr, Oscar Romero, Paul Negrut, Brother Yun.

Just stop and reflect for a moment on some of the people mentioned in this list. And remember, these are not necessarily people in the first flush of their youth, people for whom the settled comfort of middle or even old age could have been an excuse for doing nothing when God spoke to them. Take, for example, Noah (v7), who was over 500 years old when he started the Ark. Fair enough, the circumstances here are a bit unusual, but even then 500 years old wasn’t exactly the prime of life. God asks him to build this huge ship far from any sizeable body of water and he gets on and does it. A bit of a risk – not only in terms of his reputation and his sanity – I’m sure you’ll agree. But he does it because he is sure of “*what he did not see*”, of God’s protection and presence.

Abraham, well on into his life, leaves his settled existence as a nomad – can you have “a settled existence as a nomad”? Well, his familiar way of life – and travels off into a far away place with all his family and flocks, because God tells him to. He then has to risk his future, his heritage and his reputation on the almost unbelievable promise that God makes him about a son. And when his son is born, he is asked to go and sacrifice him. There’s a few risks inherent in all that lot – certainly not a comfortable life.

And what about the parents of Moses – Jochebed and Amram? They took the risk of keeping and protecting a son who should have been killed at birth. The consequences for them could have been horrendous, but they somehow knew that there was a purpose in it all. And there’s Rahab – Rahab the whore, who was drawn into the faith of God’s people and took a course of action that could well have meant her death from either her enemies or her own people, but without which the entry of God’s people into their Promised Land would have been much harder, if not impossible. These were people who heard God’s call and who did not take care, did not sit back and enjoy their comfort, but took risks and saw God’s purposes being furthered through them.

And then there’s my favourite bit of this chapter – like the last couple of sentences of an Oscar acceptance speech, these are the “people too numerous to mention” – in vv32-38. This list of people whose lives read like a series of plots for the most outlandish adventure films. The curiously named Mrs Lesbia Scott (wife of the Rector of Gidleigh & Chagford in Devon) wrote a song about it which was in the old *Baptist Hymn Book* (and I discover is also reproduced in *Junior Praise*). It is extremely unlikely that we shall ever sing it here, but it takes the idea behind these verses and effectively sanitises it and makes it all sound very nice (you may sense as I read it to you that the wonderful Mrs Scott sometimes struggled to find a rhyme!) [*I sing a song of the saints of God* JP115].

Anyway, I do not want to make light of the stories of these people who really did risk everything for the sake of their faith in God because they could not conceive of a no-risk discipleship. They moved forward into unknown territory prepared to lay everything, including their lives, on the altar of their devotion to God. To that list could be added the names of New Testament disciples such as Peter, John and Paul (as well as others whom I have already mentioned). I wonder how our faith might stand up in such circumstances. I wonder how firm our commitment would be if we faced the prospect of jeers and flogging, of being stoned, sawn in two, living lives of destitution and persecution. Some of us here struggle with the thought of having to give up an hour or two of time, let alone giving up our lives: with the prospect of not being able to go on holiday, let alone not being able to go anywhere beyond the reach of chains that manacle you to the wall.

A few years ago now, God gave us a vision here at Wade Street Church of what this church could become for him. He called us forward into uncharted territory, to new schemes and projects. We had architect's plans and artist's impressions of our new buildings, but we didn't have a detailed programme of what we were going to do in those new buildings. We really took a risk with our building project. Just as Noah knew all the construction details of the Ark but not how it was going to be used, so we knew what our premises will be like, but the plans God has for us in it were far from clear. It was a risk – a £400,000 risk (which ended up as a £500,000 risk!). Many people, whose eye is on a risk-free coast through life, would counsel against going ahead until all the facts are known, all the risks assessed, all the bases covered. But that's not what God asks of us. He gave us the vision and called us to move forward in the direction he had begun to make known.

And we are beginning to see the way it's all working out – a set of buildings used by the church and by the community every day of the week. All kinds of people come in here between the short periods we're together in this room. There are amazing opportunities for witness here at the heart of this city. And the project is almost paid for already! But notice that I said, "We are **beginning** to see..." This isn't finished here. God hasn't got us to this point just to sit back and rest. He has more things for us to do, other ways of getting involved in his work, greater plans for us as his people – and bigger risks for us to take. But we know that he is faithful. What has happened here over the past few years surely strengthens us in our faith, in our confidence that if we are prepared to take risks for him, he will honour that and bless us. The new Friarsgate Development will mean a whole host of new opportunities which we must grasp with both hands for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

And it's the same in our own individual lives. What's God calling you to do? What has he been laying on your heart recently – or maybe for many years – that you have refused to face up to because you aren't entirely sure of all the consequences? These people we've read about this evening had a firm faith in God, a faith that he would prosper his work through them and that they would one day receive their reward. They didn't know how far ahead that might be, nor how much difficulty they'd have in the mean time, but they were "*sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see*". You know, as I've said, it's really scary, but that's what I want – to listen for God's voice and then have the excitement – the spine-tingling, stomach-churning excitement of doing it for God, of getting involved in his plans and purposes.

You see, in Jesus, God took the greatest risk of all. He died on that cross without there being any guarantee that anyone would want to take up the offer of reconciliation with God that it made possible. And he is our example and our inspiration. David Coffey again: "*If you have a low-risk, play-it-safe discipleship then you are not fulfilling the fullness of what God intended.*" God is constantly challenging

us as to our readiness to live for him – personally and corporately – and we need to respond to that, to respond regularly and eagerly. It may seem, just talking about it, as if that could become a terrible burden, an awful drag, but listening for God’s voice and responding as he calls is the most exciting, energising thing you could ever do.

It wasn’t until I was reading this chapter again in preparation for this that I noticed a phrase towards the end of it. At the beginning of v38 we read, “*the world was not worthy of them*”. The risk-free, comfortable, predictable world of human security was not worthy of these people. They didn’t fit in. What an epitaph! How would you like that on your headstone – “*The world was not worthy of him/her*”? I think it would be great – but the thing is, you’d never see it. But you would have the sure and certain hope of a reward in heaven and the knowledge that the Kingdom of God had been in some way extended by your contribution. Do it on your own – and do it with God’s people here. Don’t take care – take risks!