**Sermon: Risky business**

**Readings:** Galatians 6:7-11 & Matthew 25:14-30

Some of you will know that yesterday, our PCC had its annual “away day” – a time where we take the opportunity to consider some of the weightier issues that we don’t really have time to consider at our regular meetings. This year, we had two particular items to give some thought to: the first being our future relationship with St Paul and St Luke’s and the second being our response to the proposal to join the Inclusive Church network.

Now, neither of these issues is at all straight forward and both have required a good deal of thought and a not insubstantial degree of soul-searching. There are still a number of factors to be considered, but we made good headway and arrived at some decisions that felt as though they had been guided by God’s Spirit.

One of the readings we used to give us a scriptural starting point was Matthew’s account of the Parable of the Talents that we have just had read for us by John/Margaret. This parable has often been misunderstood, with many believing “talents” to refer to our God-given abilities, where in fact the original meaning is a reference to a large sum of money. A talent, it is estimated, was the equivalent of the amount a labourer would earn over 15 years – a considerable sum! - and I’ve changed the amounts in the text to reflect what that might be worth in today’s money. Of course, this passage isn’t just about what we should do with any money at our disposal, but rather about our attitude to all gifts that God has entrusted to us.

The parable itself is not very neat and some parts of it seem quite unfair. Many scholars believe that what we read in Matthew and Luke may well have changed from its original form (an early text describes one of the servants as frittering his talent away on “harlots and pipe girls”!), but I think the central theme is expressed wonderfully in the Message translation - “It’s criminal to live cautiously”, and “get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb.”

Now this might sound a bit alarming, but I really do believe that God wants us to take risks for the building up of his kingdom. The example of the early church was not one of cautious living and nor has it been of those Christian communities that have since flourished.

And yet, the sort of risk taking that our faith requires is not about reckless living – about attaching ourselves to every popular fad and agreeing to every request that is made of us – but rather, it is about letting go of our self-interest and allowing God’s Spirit to be our guide. The Bible is full of characters who took a risk, believing that God would lead them to the right places and outcomes – think of Abraham leaving his lands, of Moses returning to Pharaoh, David standing before Goliath, Ruth following her mother-in-law(!), and all of the disciples leaving their former lives to follow Jesus. And many of you know a lot about risk taking here at Christ Church – making a decision to invest time, effort and a considerable amount of money in a high-quality Community Centre that carried no guarantee of success.

We will never be able to work out every possible eventuality before we commit to action, but when we do step out into the unknown, prayerfully and using the gifts of reason, scripture and tradition that we have received through God’s Grace, we can be confident that we do not act alone. It’s here that “risk” perhaps gives way to “faith” – our trust in God allowing us to leave our comfort zones and step into the unknown in confidence. Our “risk taking” leading to “faith making”.

So, what does “risk taking” mean for us at this time in the life of our church? What opportunities and challenges are we facing? And how might we use our resources wisely, prayerfully and courageously?

Well, both issues that the PCC looked at yesterday can be seen as carrying a fair degree of risk for different reasons, and many of you have talked to me about your concerns and your hopes. The proposal to extend our parish to include St Paul and St Luke’s in Tranmere brings with it the risk of us overstretching ourselves and asks questions about our management of resources and where our priorities might lie. Whilst the proposal to join the Inclusive Church network brings the risk of damaging relationships with some local churches and of labelling ourselves in a way that, paradoxically, could be understood as exclusive!

To address the Inclusive Church idea first, the PCC have endorsed much of the sentiment behind the organisation’s mission statement and have agreed that there may well be times when we would want to join with other churches to challenge positions of exclusion - particularly those where we feel presumptions are being made about Christian authority or where there might be potential damage to the mission of the Church. Yet, yesterday, we arrived at a position where it was strongly agreed that in how we operate and in what we offer in our worship here at Christ Church, we are already an inclusive church, offering welcome to all people and love to our communities, simply out of the fact that we are all children of God. We felt that there was little to be gained out of joining an organisation that labels us in a very specific group, though there emerged a clear and deep intention to make our commitment to inclusion heard at every opportunity.

Concerning the relationship with St Paul and St Luke’s, the past few months have brought a deepening friendship between the congregations and PCCs. We currently provide a preacher for one or two services a month (Eunice is there today) and we have started to support each others’ events. However, it has become increasingly clear that there is need for us to make a decision on whether to offer more than friendship and, in particular, move to formally bring our two parishes together as one. The outcome of our discussions was that the PCC felt very strongly that this is what God is calling us to do.

In such a major undertaking, there is clearly a significant degree of risk, but there is also great opportunity to further live out our faith in helping develop both a clear Christian presence in this area and a place of welcome for many who are in real need.

I’m convinced that sharing something of what we have been building here at Christ Church could be a real blessing to the community based around St Paul & St Luke’s. It will take some effort to make this work and we will need more pairs of hands willing to help out, but that shouldn’t be a deterrent. When we give of ourselves for the sake of others, when we undertake hardship for the good of our communities, when we follow in the way of Jesus for the building of God’s kingdom, that is real living, that is abundant life, and that is authentic discipleship.

Let us pray…