

Taking risks in Jesus's name

Texts: Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Earlier this year, researchers from Stanford University published a study¹ showing that belief in God make people take bigger risks to gain rewards, because they feel that God will protect them from harm. When that doesn't work out, and the risk taking leads to personal loss, the participants in the study feel lousy towards their second-rate divine protector.

After Jesus was arrested, Peter was in no mood to take any risks. Three times he denied knowing his master. Immediately after Pentecost, a very different Peter was taking big risks in his master's name. He healed a cripple in the backyard of very people who put Jesus to death. Then, in front of these people, he told them that they had committed murder:

Rulers of the people and elders ... let it be known to all of you ... that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.

Peter was able to do this because he was utterly convinced that God had raised Jesus from the dead. That conviction transformed him into a risk taker for God.

But Peter's was a very different kind of risk taking than what the Stanford researchers studied. Nor is it anything like the risk taking in God's name that leads fanatics to blow themselves up in the middle of a crowded market place. No, Peter's risk taking was a conscious imitation of the kind of risk taking that he learnt from Jesus: 'This man is standing before you in good health *by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.*'

Jesus tells us about his kind of risk taking in our Gospel reading:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The good shepherd quite literally risked his life for the sheep. This is the kind of risk taking that the hired hand refuses to take part in:

The hired hand ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away.

¹ Kupor et al. *Psych. Sci.* Feb. 25 2015, 0956797614563108.

The hired hand can be compared to the subjects in that Stanford study. They will only take risks for their own gain; and God is the big divine insurer to load the die in their favour; the moment the insurance doesn't seem to work out for them, they turn their back. Jesus was not like that. He received a commandment from God to love his disciples; so, in the words of the communion service,

... having loved his own, he loved them to the end ...

and laid down his life *for them*. He took a risk for the sake of those whom God had given him. On the cross, even Jesus asked 'Why?' - 'My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?' The risk taking did not seem to have worked out!

But God vindicated this death by raising Jesus from the dead. Barely 2 months later, the risk-averse disciple who denied Jesus three times was proclaiming Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin. Peter's risk taking would ultimately lead to the same place that it led Jesus, to a cross. But he was quite sure that, ultimately, it would also lead to his resurrection.

John tells us in his first epistle that as Jesus's disciples, we're all called to this sort of risk taking for the sake of others:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

As Easter people, we are asked to trust in God enough to lay down our lives for one another. Another verb for this kind of risk taking is 'believe':

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another ...

We demonstrate that we believe in Jesus by following his example of risk taking *for others* to the point of laying down our lives. Those two little words, 'for others', distinguishes *this* kind of risk taking from the kind of risk taking in the Stanford study. That study was about the subjects' propensity to take risks *for their own gain*. A religion that makes us more prepared to do that is not the Christian religion. A god that makes us more prepared to do that is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The kind of risk taking that Jesus calls us to is risk taking *for the sake of others*, irrespective of the cost to ourselves. If doing so means that we get nailed to a cross, apparently god forsaken, then so be it.

"Sure, sure," I hear you say. "All this talk about risk taking and being nailed to a cross is very dramatic and good sermonising. But what's it got to do with me? It's about as removed from my humdrum life here and now as all this Easter talk

about empty tomb and resurrection. I've never taken risks that landed me on a cross; neither, for that matter, have I taken part in resurrection!"

But perhaps that is the point. Maybe it is because we have always declined the invitation to take up the cross *for others* that we have never been surprised by resurrection. "I've never declined the invitation to take up the cross *for others*," you may say, "I've never been invited!" I'm not so sure. Here are some invitations that we may have been missing for some time.

Maybe we have a long-standing broken relationship. Reconciliation is very risky, and being the first to say the word 'sorry' for the sake of reaching out to the other person feels like death. So here's an invitation to take risks in Jesus's name. Jesus promises that when we reach out to heal relationships for the sake of each other, we will experience something like resurrection.

Maybe we've noticed a stranger sitting in the pew behind us. Talking to that stranger is very risky, and it feels like death to start the conversation for the sake of the newcomer. So here's an invitation to take risks in Jesus's name. Jesus promises that when we offer the hand of fellowship for the sake of the stranger, we will experience something like resurrection.

Maybe our church has reached something of an impasse in how to integrate our worship with our community outreach. Changing the way we do things is very risky, and it will feel like death to give up familiar words and hymns for the sake of the outsider. So here's an invitation to take risks in Jesus's name. Jesus promises that if we learn to give priority to the interest of "the sheep that do not [yet] belong to this fold" rather than our own likes and dislikes, our church will experience something like resurrection.

Maybe in the forthcoming general election, the interest of the party we support goes against what the country needs at this time. Not voting for our party's candidate is very risky, and it feels like death not to put the pencil to the square that we have marked all our lives. So here's an invitation to take risks in Jesus's name. Jesus promises that if we each put the interest of the wider community before that of the party, our nation will experience something like resurrection.

So, yes, there are invitations to take risks for the sake of others aplenty. It's just a matter of whether we choose to hear them and respond. John urges us to respond in his epistle:

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

If we do take up the invitation to risky action for others' sake, we should expect a rough ride. Psalm 23 tells us that the good shepherd will lead the flock 'through the darkest valleys'. Jesus laid in a tomb for three days. But believing in Jesus

means believing that resurrection is certain, and that it will come in the most unpredictable ways when we're least expecting it - in an upper room behind locked doors, or on a desultory walk to Emmaus.

In a little while we'll be filing up to the altar to take communion. We eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of Jesus's own risk taking for our sake. If we don't do the same for each other, then what communion is but a sham. On the other hand, if we are committed to risky action for the sake of others, then we will find in the bread and wine the real presence of Christ, for

Take, eat, this is my body broken for you, and
Drink this all of you, for this is my blood shed for you and for many.

Amen.