

Trinity 15, 2010  
Twente, Arnhem

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

### **Risky Pursuit**

We don't normally associate gambling with Christianity. Now, Bingo has been used to raise money in some churches, but that's generally as far as it goes. Interestingly, though, there are several instances of 'casting lots' in the Bible – usually to try to discern God's will. E.g. Deciding between two qualified (Spirit-filled and gifted) apostles to replace Judas the traitor: the lot fell to Matthias instead of Justus. (Prov 16:13: 'The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone.)

But otherwise we don't associate gambling with faith.

But actually, this week and last, the Gospel readings dwelt on risk taking – sort of gambling, if you will.

Last week, Jesus told the crowds that if they really wanted to follow him, they'd have to take up their cross and lay down everything else. Talk about inviting risk! Giving up a secure life and gambling everything on Jesus' kingdom.

I suggested, though, that this should not be seen as irrational risk-taking without serious forethought about the costs and benefits. Belief in God and choosing to follow Christ have often been described (or dismissed) as 'leaps of faith', as if you jump into the dark. That's not how Jesus described it.

He knew that committing to Him was a tall order. And he wanted to impress on everyone how important the choice was. As ever, he gave picture images to illustrate:

<sup>28</sup>For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?

<sup>29</sup>Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him,<sup>30</sup> saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." <sup>31</sup>Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup>If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.'

God's Kingdom and the Way of Christ are near to us, because Jesus has come into our world. We have a choice, like the tower builder, to invest well, or not. But in another sense, God's Kingdom is coming anyway, regardless whether we welcome it or not; we don't have a choice about that. So, like the monarch in the 2<sup>nd</sup> parable, it might be prudent to recognize the magnitude of what is going to happen, and react shrewdly.

Christ recognizes that to choose His way is a bit risky. We don't beforehand what dangers and inconveniences we may encounter, though Jesus certainly warns us. But he also speaks of the great rewards.

He wants us to know the risks, but take the wise gamble because of the great rewards. His words and the promises of His Father are true.

Faith is not a leap in the dark but a calculated decision made by those who are wise. That is the argument. It is also what the French philosopher Blaise Pascal thought. He suggested it was better to gamble that God exists and not lose out if He does, than to gamble that God doesn't exist and lose out if he does. For Pascal, faith was no leap, but an educated guess, a calculated risk that a wise person would take.

Kenny Rogers' country music hit describes the quintessential Gambler: a wise old guy who is shrewd about his choices: 'You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,/ Know when to walk away and know

when to run./ You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table./ There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.'

I happen to believe there's a lot more evidence of God's presence in our lives than we often see or admit, so for me it is not so much of a gamble, anyway. But still, faith in God and choosing to follow Christ in this life can be seen as a bit of a gamble, even if it is unquestionably worthwhile.

What's more mind-boggling, though, is to consider that God is a bit of a gambler. He gambles on us.

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16a). What a gamble God took that any of us would respond in faith to Jesus. Talk about Mission Improbable. Yet God risked his Son on us.

Like a shepherd who would abandon 99 of his sheep to go after the one that wandered off. Or the lady who stops everything to scour her house for the one coin that went missing.

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.' Perhaps the best-known summary of the Good News of salvation in the Bible.

But how about this: Luke 15, verse 2: 'This fellow [as in, Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them!' God sent his Son into the world to save sinners. God sent his Son for people like you and me. God loves us, and would do anything, including risking his only Son, to get us back.

The risk was enormous, but God felt it was worth it. Think of 'Finding Nemo' or 'Saving Private Ryan.' Enormous risks are taken to retrieve someone who someone else loves. It may all seem exaggerated, but put yourself in the position of the parent. What wouldn't a parent do to get a child back? Just this past week we heard in the news about an Australian father, Ken Thompson, who cycled thousands of miles across

Europe looking for his abducted son. Fortunately, he found the boy – right 'here' in Amsterdam. Can you imagine the rejoicing there must have been in Australia, in the family home?

Such is the rejoicing in God our Father's heaven when any one of us, who were lost, is finally found by God, or, to put it the other way, finds God. But this is God's gambit. This is why he sent His Son on that dangerous mission so long ago. One who met and ate with people like us. God risks a lot on us. But he considers that we're worth it. Joy to the world at the wonders of God's love! Amen.