

Risking Mistakes

Mark 8.27-38

It is a bit startling to hear Peter being addressed as "Satan". It is even more startling in Matthew's version, where after recognising who Jesus is, he is told he is a happy man. 'Happy Man' to 'Satan' in two sentences. But that is how Jesus treats him, at least as Matthew tells it. Actually, if you look closely, it may well imply that it wasn't so immediately. But whatever the time scale, here is Peter, the rock on which Jesus will build his church, who is then represented as "Satan". I think it is a story about taking risks, and I would like to explore that in three ways - Jesus taking risks, Peter taking risks, and then what risks **we** have to take.

What risks is Jesus taking you may well ask? Well, he gambles on whether or not the disciples have got hold of the truth about who he is. If he had asked them "Who do you say I am?" too soon, then it would have been counter-productive. He has to risk getting his timing wrong. He has been trying to show them what his message is about - what **he** is about. But have they got it yet? But he has to take a risk like this, because it is on these men that his mission stands or falls. When he has done what he has come to do, they will be able, or not be able, to bring it to fruition. We are the Christian church, but we have to remember that Jesus never attended a single church meeting. He set up the framework within which that could come about. But it was the apostles who had to do the doing. He had to risk them making mistakes. And of course they did - they made enormous mistakes. They started off thinking that Christian faith was a sub-set of Judaism, and didn't bother preaching the good news to Gentiles. But Peter was amongst those who enabled that to happen when the issue was focussed. They tried a kind of primitive communism, with goods held in common - but clearly that didn't work either. And those are only examples of the mistakes they have left a record of - they must have made countless others, as they struggled to work out what being a Christian was all about. Jesus had to risk everything by trusting these men. And specifically at the time of the incident we hear about today, he had to risk them misinterpreting him. It was going to be clear that in the wider circle of believers, there were some who were holding hopes that he would be the war-like deliverer of the people from the hated Romans. There was an interpretation of the idea of "Messiah" current which led to that hope. Were these closest people to him going to see beyond that? There is a long-held theory that Judas was one who didn't go beyond that, and betrayed Jesus because he hadn't fulfilled those hopes.

But if Jesus had not risked them getting it wrong, then they would never have had the opportunity to get it **right**. The only way he could move the mission forward was to risk it with them. He could not bring in the Kingdom on his own. It would need them, and therefore the risk had to be taken.

Or look at it from Peter's point of view. Asked the direct question "Who do you say that I am?" - he had to risk stating an answer. They were put on the spot. And on the whole we don't like being put

on the spot. Politicians have tremendous skills in avoiding being made to say what they really think. And sometimes it is only when we are put on the spot that we take a step forward. Jesus pinned these men down in person. Peter takes an **enormous** risk in voicing his answer. Suppose the others had howled him down. Suppose he was wrong? Very few of us like voicing opinions that we aren't sure will be generally acceptable, or aren't the so-called "right" answer. We don't want to appear "different" or "stupid".

But not only does Peter risk voicing that opinion, he goes on to work out some implications, and take further risks in doing so. He risks telling Jesus that things mustn't happen the way he has predicted, with all the talk of suffering and death that Jesus was coming out with. This didn't fit in with Peter's ore-conceptions of what a Messiah should have to do. So, encouraged by the fact that he got one thing apparently right, he builds on that, and says some more. But this time he is slapped down very hard indeed. I wonder how you would have reacted, if you had been Peter. Some would probably say "Well, I'm keeping my mouth shut next time". Happily, Peter wasn't like that. He went on taking risks, saying things that were over the top - "I'll die rather than deny you". But it was on the risk-taking man that Jesus chose to build his church, and not on some safer person who was more cautious.

So what of **our** risk-taking? Do we ever? Sometimes? Often? Norman Goodall wrote in a book about an Indian pastor who said that the trouble with his church was that there were never any surprises. He might be speaking for the majority of Christendom. Do you know the words of the hymn 'May we with courage take the risk and leave the past behind To be a people on the move, throw caution to the wind'?

We sometimes seem to be afraid, as the Christian Community, to take risks. We might get it wrong, we might fail, we might end up with egg on our faces. The word "faith" seems to have lost any sense of risk at all. Think about Abraham's act of faith in leaving Haran. He didn't know where he would end up. But he went from trust to adventure with God. But we like things to be very carefully weighed and balanced. There is wisdom in that, of course. But had the early church been like that, maybe we wouldn't be in churches today. Just let your imagination run riot for a minute. If you had to represent the Christian Church as a kind of vehicle, what would you choose? I suggested voicing an opinion was taking a risk for Peter - anyone like to risk an answer ???

Well, I see people treating the Church as an ambulance - to get the sick some help and healing. Nothing wrong with that. I see others treating it as an armoured personnel carrier - it keeps people safe from any attacks from outside. I see people treating it as a limousine - a place to feel comfortable and relaxed in, protected from the bumps in the road. But I suspect that Peter would be happier with the Church as a Land Rover - not a very comfortable ride, but one that will get over rough ground, and be able to keep going whatever the conditions. It is an adventurer's vehicle - and faith for Abram, for Peter and for us ought to be an adventure.

I have been talking of the whole church - but what of ourselves as individuals? Do we **adventure** with God, taking some risks? Maybe we have to make some mistakes, and be slapped down. Peter

was, and got up again, and again, and again. And see where it got him - and the rest of Christendom!

For as long as I can remember, it seems like, at parents evenings we were told that one or other of our offspring would get on better if they contributed more in classroom discussions. They have got the ideas inside, but they don't risk letting them out, or they know the foreign language, but don't try it out with enough confidence. And of course the reason that gets said time and again - probably to almost every parent - is because that is how education really happens. We have to take what we are taught, and put it into practice. And in risking getting it wrong, we are not failing, we are learning how to succeed. At some point, whatever it is we are learning - schools subjects, driving, flying - the instructor has to say - right, now you are on your own. **You** do it. And if at that point we can't take the risk, then we are wasting our time.

The miracle is that God is a risk-taking God. He risked his only Son - and Jesus didn't **have** to obey, if the story of Gethsemane is to be believed. Jesus risked the continuance of his mission to these highly unsophisticated and unlearned peasants he gathered around him. Well, those were **real** risks, and neither went completely smoothly. But in the end of the day, the risk was worth it. And he goes on taking risks with us today. We are very likely to fail, to misunderstand, to confuse the issue, just as Peter did. But he risks working in and through us, nonetheless. If God can trust us, why can't we trust him enough to take a few risks as well? Let me end with the last two lines of that hymn I quoted earlier:

Give us the faith of Abraham, for changes make us bold
And bless us only so that we in turn may
bless the world.