

## Risky Business! The Cost of being a Christian

Exodus 3: 1 – 15 St. Matthew 16: 21 – 28.

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The Israelites are “crying out” - again. But now it is not the harsh practices of any Egyptian slave masters that are causing their misery. However, a news report a week or so ago about sustained protests in the streets of *modern* day Israel noted that “middle-class families complain that a country once viewed as an example of intimate *equality*, today has one of the *largest gaps between rich and poor* in the industrialized world.” The reporter was intrigued that these protesters were not political activists, or Palestinians or people upset about the plight of the Palestinians, but “*normal* Israelis concerned that their country is losing all sense of *moral and collective responsibility*”. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the Old Testament might be forgiven for thinking that the Israelis, of all people, should know that God does not like such large gaps, especially as a result of *inequality*. For inequality of opportunity can only be a sign of injustice and a lack of caring concern for one’s neighbour, a sure ingredient of “collective responsibility”. And God also has a lot to say about the failure to take responsibility for one’s *moral* actions. But we had better not get too smug, singling out Israel in this respect.

On the same day these protests in Israel were being reported, one news item out of Cayman’s ‘Mother Country’ read like this:

“Ed Miliband (leader of the Labour Party) has blamed the riots that swept English cities on a “me first” culture and accepted Labour must share the blame for creating it. The Labour leader said *his* party had failed to tackle *inequality* and not paid enough attention to *morality*. And he linked the riots to a wider collapse in *social responsibility* exemplified by the banking crisis and the Parliamentarians’ expenses scandal. The *Prime Minister* has also spoken of a collapse in personal responsibility.” Remember, the “Prime Minister” referred to is the leader of the *Conservative* Party, and having the two of them agree on anything like this means it is pretty undeniable!

And in the US, our mentor on this side of the Atlantic, the headlines echoed “*Wealth Gap Widens!*” And the figures were pretty convincing: 20 to 1 ratio in average incomes between the races; while the top 1% of income earners in the US take in 20% of the nation’s income, up from 8% in the 1970’s.

‘Thankfully, we live in Cayman’ I might hear you say. I didn’t look for matching headlines in the local news at that time. But just thinking of some things the United Church has made representation on in the past few years, I have seen that the Gender *Equality* Bill has been opposed by the Chamber of Commerce, ‘Living Wage’, even *Minimum* Wage, legislation is being resisted, and nothing has been done about the apparent inequity in the rules for granting Permanent Residence. I think we have gaps too

“Thou shalt not covet” is not only meant to help us not to feel envious of the possessions or lavish lifestyle of those with more than we have; or keep us from getting into trouble by trying to get by devious means whatever someone else has. It is *also* meant to warn those with plenty already, to not be so greedy and try to take the last penny out of the poor person’s hand. ‘Leave the edges of your fields for them to glean!’

God still sees the misery and hears the cry and is concerned about the suffering of the oppressed, just as we heard him explain to Moses.

And as Moses discovered, when God sees such injustice, things can indeed get risky for those whom He calls to follow Him. Peter too! There are many parallels in the two texts we read this morning, and some seeming disparities. We might think that Moses 'got off lightly' with his reaction to what God was telling him, compared to Peter. Both were guilty of the same thing. Trying to 'correct' God or tell God what to do and not to do. Both also demonstrated their lack of knowledge of Who God really is, what He stands for or what His attributes are. Of course, I hasten to add that I am only able to say this with the benefit of the New Testament explaining to me all about Jesus' life on earth, His death, resurrection, ascension back into Heaven, and Pentecost. Peter did not have that – and I am painfully conscious that even now I do not recognise *so many* of the whats the whys and the hows of what God is doing. Peter, with the Israelite vision of the conquering Messiah fixed in his mind, was not about to hear of Jesus suffering and dying – and perhaps did not even catch that show stopping line about being “raised to life” again on the third day. But he must have been pretty shocked when Jesus admonished him for speaking the words of Satan. After all, when Jesus asked the Disciples who did they say He was, just a few verses earlier, it was Peter who had recognised that Jesus was not a return of some of the earlier prophets, as other people were saying, but the Messiah, the Christ. I suspect Peter did not expect to be going from “blessed” to “Satan”, or from the promised keeper of the 'keys of heaven' to 'a stumbling block to [Jesus]'. Jesus does seem to have been very saddened by Peter's protective reaction, that Jesus will *never* suffer. Interestingly, our NIV and a number of other modern translations of the Bible start this new segment at verse 21. In William Barclay's translation, he starts the segment with verse 20 “Then He warned His Disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ” and goes on to suggest that Jesus knew they weren't ready yet to explain, to preach, what that really meant, as they still did not understand enough about Him and God's redeeming mission through Him. Interesting thought. Clearly Peter had not yet understood all this.

Neither did Moses, at this stage in *his* journey with God. Peter had won Jesus' praise and blessings for being able to answer “Who do you say I am?” Moses had turned that same question around on God – Who will I tell the people You are? We know that a person's name was very significant to the ancient Israelites – usually being descriptive. What Moses was asking was not literally for God's name but for a descriptive explanation of God. God was very patient in response. He didn't question what had Moses not understood of the Israelite history of God's authorship of creation; His generosity to humankind in giving them everything in the world except warning them away from access to evil; His righteousness, mercy and timeless faithfulness displayed in His relations with Noah, Abraham and Sara, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and in Moses' own life from before he was born, as we heard last Sunday. God didn't remonstrate that He was the God who called whomever He chose to do redeeming work for Him, even old men content to live in exile for decades tending someone else's sheep. Call them and send them on *risky business*, back to confront the powers that be from whom they had fled before. He didn't say that Moses should be able to tell from what He had just said that He is the God who cares for those who cry out because of oppression and ill-treatment and who in His compassion takes redeeming action for them. Or that He had just explained that He is the God who liberates his people - but expects them to worship Him in their freedom, for worshipping God is what makes us complete.

Instead, He patiently said “*I will be with you*” – but made it clear that it was *He* who set the plan and the way it would be done and decided who would confront Pharaoh. Like Peter, Moses’ job was to “get behind” God and follow Him. Not tell God that He needs someone else to rescue the slaves of Egypt or, in Peter’s case, find a different way to save the captives of sin, but certainly not by dying on the Cross! ‘Trust that God knows what He is doing and do your part to help.’ Moses was reluctant, beaten down by his earlier experiences perhaps. Peter was eager and passionate, always jumping in with both feet. But in this their problem was the same - they hadn’t discerned enough about who God is. And they were letting the limitations of the “things of men” guide their thinking, constrain their vision of possibilities and inhibit their actions, rather than accept that the “things of God” are what will work in the end, even when they seem impossible.

Doesn’t that still ring true today? All three of us who look back to Abraham’s promise from God tell a different story of the Name of God, of Who He is and what He stands for and how His love for humans is reconciled to and in His righteousness. Even amongst the Christian Church we tell the story from our different slants. Even within the United Church, as in any denomination, we struggle with this as individuals, perhaps especially the tension between telling of the absolute righteousness of God which cannot condone sin, *and* God’s unconditional love for sinful humans! But it is no longer the time it was in the passage we read today, when Jesus had said “not to tell anyone that He is the Christ”. Just the opposite, Jesus has now told us if we believe in Him we *must* go into the whole world *and tell the Gospel*, the good news about Him and the salvation He provides. And like Peter and Moses, we need to know how to tell others *who God is* and what Christ has done for us and how the Holy Spirit will empower us, as He later did for Peter. It might be that we have to be like Moses, and ask God to help us tell the people Who He is. And we will never be able to explain every question we will get. We have to accept that God did say “I am Who I am” and “I will be Who I will be”. And we have to tell that to others. Things will happen that they wonder about. But God is God. Blessed be the name of the Lord. We have to just rest assured, convicted of his promise, “I will be with you.”

Moses, instead of trusting God, let his human outlook make him contemplate that if he attempted what God had asked him to do, the first *risk* he faced was the possibility of failure, right from the start. How would he be able to convince the Egyptians, Pharaoh, that they had better listen to what God said and let the Israelites go? How would he be able to convince the Israelites that they could *depend* on this message that God was rescuing them, so they must leave and follow Moses out into the desert? In other words, how could he explain to both of them who God is in such an accurate way that they listened, believed and obeyed? He foresaw the risk - and he didn’t want to take on the job. And we know that the risk proved very real. Even when by the obvious and awesome miracles of God he got the Israelites out, got them free from the slavery that they had been groaning under in misery, they had spells when they wanted to go back to the familiar lifestyle they had first been glad to leave behind. Even when God had accompanied them so faithfully and *obviously*, and Moses was up on the mountain top receiving the Ten Commandments from God, they were down below breaking the first ones, building a golden calf to worship instead.

Moses’ reluctance was probably also based on in his own history with the Egyptians and the Israelites. He’d gone from an adopted favoured prince of Egypt to a fugitive because of trying, in his own way, to help the Israelites before. So, when he heard God’s call to follow Him, he didn’t like the

risks he foresaw. *And there were some risks he almost certainly did not foresee.* If we had continued reading our story a little further, just into the next chapter, when Moses finally started out on his journey to Egypt, we suddenly run into this verse: “At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses *and was about to kill him.*” Now *that* sounds like risky business! And the reason for that dramatic turn of events was what we might think of as a simple, “small” act of disobedience or ‘non-compliance’. Jesus stressed the same principle to us, ‘If you would *serve Me*, you must *follow Me*, you must *obey Me.*’ God is love. God is also absolutely righteous. God sees and hears the *heart*. So that peril faced by Moses is very real for us as Christians today. Sincerity and integrity. It is why it is never sufficient for the Christian to ‘*go and tell*’ God’s message with words if what we *do* is not faithful to God and in obedience to His precepts. It is also not effective! That is one reason the Church is often not taken seriously or, increasingly in today’s world and today’s Cayman, held up to disbelief and contempt by so many. We *hear* you always preaching, we are told publicly, that God says to do so and so but we do not *see* you doing that. For the Christian, Moses’ question to God has become Jesus’ question to us, ‘Who do you say – by your actions as well as your explanations - that I am?’ That is a serious responsibility. And it can get complicated.

But that is a minor part of the costs! Most of us, hopefully none, will ever face the life threatening ordeals Jesus was preparing His disciples for in our Matthew text, as He prepared for His own death. As I sat contemplating today’s theme, I thought of the Corrie Ten Boom book, *The Hiding Place*. That was, to me, an unforgettable example of how great the cost of being a Christian can indeed be – and what it means to follow Christ, to hold on to our faith in God, trusting His promise to Moses this morning that “I will be with you” - even when you know it will mean death. And seeing the incredible signs that it was indeed Him “who had sent you”, to take on the dangers of saving Jews and others from Hitler’s genocide, through the concentration camps, still helping others though starving, sick, exhausted, and leading worship in the shadows of all the horror in there, right out to the rehabilitation of your former persecutors after the war. Yes, it was also an incredible example of taking up your cross and following Christ even by truly loving your *enemies*. A tremendous, real life affirmation that God will indeed be with us and strengthen us beyond what we would normally consider humanly possible. I really pray none of us will ever be so tested, though we do have brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are still paying the ultimate cost of being a faithful Christian.

But for us here today, Jesus’ words this morning are still pointedly directed to us. We are unlikely, I believe, to face death because of our Christian commitment. But we will often be called to *lay down our life* for others, as Jesus put it elsewhere, or “lose” it, as it was written this morning, in order to save our eternal lives. That is, if we follow Jesus we continuously have to ‘lay down’, to ‘sacrifice’, some of our personal aspirations, priorities, time, some of ‘the life’ we see others ‘enjoying,’ for the benefit of others, from family member to complete stranger far away being victimised and even killed because of their commitment to Christ.

And like Moses finally heading back to Egypt to do what God required Him to do, taking on the role is not good enough if we are disobeying God in other ways. And like Peter eager to get cracking with *his* vision of the Messiah’s mission, it is not for us to say this is the way it will be done. Our call is to *follow Christ* and do it *His way* even if our first reaction is like Peter’s, who thought he needed to protect Him from taking that course.

Especially when everyone is clamouring for all kinds of action, we need to remember Jesus' warning today and not jump on the bandwagon of "the things (the ways and values) of man", but try to discern and hold fast to "the things of God". Sometimes, that can mean just not overlooking Jesus' words in Mark 9: 29, "This kind can come out only by *prayer*". And I think that part is probably harder for us men, who often feel we have to *get on with it* and *do something* more active or we are going to look ineffectual, which we say, echoing Peter, will "never" do. But "trust and obey", as the hymn writer distilled it, is what the Christian needs to do. Right now in Cayman there is a lot of "clamouring" going on for actions of all kind and there is certainly a risk of Christians getting caught up in the frenzy and joining the calls for "the things of men". And certainly there is risk of the Christian Church being called ineffectual; indeed we're often labelled an impediment to implementation of the proposed 'solutions' others would have us believe are the panacea for all our ills. And definitely, especially if you are a young person trying to build your career and establish some security for yourself and your family, it can indeed seem like "risky business" to stand up and say, "hold on; can you not see this is the same kind of thinking that got us in these problems in the first place? Let us look to the *things of God* for guidance instead." The temptations and situations behind Jesus' warning today, "...what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul" (NLT), have a habit of popping up for us in many beguiling ways. Heed the warning, though it does mean sometimes having to act to change the way your employer does certain things, whether the inequity of the scales by which the profits are gathered or how the spoils are distributed amongst the staff; or correct those habits that equally rob the customer, the employer and the competitiveness of the nation; or object to potentially lucrative 'opportunities' that have even a whiff of injustice; or oppose the calls of your friends, or political party if you have one; or resist the other 'temptations of the flesh'. We need to carefully heed Jesus' warning, *do not forfeit your soul*, whether for cheap thrills, the praise of man, or tempting gains that depend on taking advantage of others; or by ignoring the hungry, the thirsty the homeless, as He also warned us. As God told *ancient* Israel, "stop doing wrong; learn to do right". Or to get back to where I started, the reason *modern* Israel is once again *crying out*, let us not lose our sense of *moral and collective responsibility*. For that is what allows us to Love God and love our fellow humans wherever they may be, as Jesus absolutely commanded us. The things of God? Or the things of Man? Which will it be? God did not say His way would be easy. To the contrary, He said it takes total commitment, to be ready to put your life on the line, to take up your cross, *each day* as St. Luke's version emphasises, and just do it. 'I will lead, you follow.' Though Salvation is free for our taking, it came at great sacrifice, and there *is* a cost of being a Christian. We know we have to be prepared to pay it daily, and we don't know exactly what form it will take. But if you think *that* is 'risky business', consider the alternative. As the NLT translates Jesus' question this morning, "Is *anything* worth more than your *soul*?" Amen.