

“Take Risks Wisely”

20 March 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Be Thou My Vision

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Sermon:

Life is uncertain; are we out of the Coronavirus pandemic or not? What will happen in the war in Ukraine? Will Manchester City win the Premier league? Will I get a job, will I pass my exams, what will be the outcome of the treatment I am having? Will I be alive this time next year? Life is full of uncertainties!

This short passage of 6 verses tells us five times that we do not know, we do not know what disaster will come on the land (v2) we do not know the path of the wind (v5a) or how the spirit enters an unformed babies body in the womb (v5b) we do not know/understand the work of God (v5c) and we do not know which way will succeed (v6) So the theme of the uncertainty of life, is in the Teacher’s mind..

What is his goal? What is he teaching? Well, he has three pieces of advice, cast you bread, give portions to seven, and sow your seed! Immediately you get the sense again that the Teacher is advocating action. Getting on, living life, using verbs he tells us to cast, to give, to sow.

So, when life is uncertain then be people of action! Isn’t it true that most of us would move in the opposite direction? When life is uncertain, we are most likely to say be cautious, wait and see, do not take a risk, what if this it goes badly, I’m not sure. The Teacher argues in the uncertainties of life that we should be a people of action, a people who take risks, not recklessly but wisely. My initial reaction to that is that sounds exciting, but how can you do that wisely. If we were to do what he asks, would life not be a lot more exciting, like a ride in a roller-coaster? So, lets look in more detail at what he says and why he says it.

I. Take risks but wisely (v1-2)

“Cast your bread upon the waters for after many days you will find it.” You and I know that bread does not float on the water, it will become waterlogged and fall to the bottom even if it does float and drift for a while on the current. Even allowing that Israelite bread would have been a flat bread and might have floated for a while longer than an Irish loaf, you are not likely to see your bread again. However, he is clear, cast your bread upon the waters for after many days you will find it again. It would help if we knew what he is thinking about, his use of the picture of the bread must be a metaphor, what does casting your bread mean? Many believe he is thinking of ships and international trade, (as in the GNB) and he is advocating taking the risk of sending out your ship with its cargo on the sea and you will after a time see it return with a profit. (1st Kings 10:22) Solomon saw his ships come back every three years.

The other main thought is that casting your bread means giving to the poor. You give your bread (money) to the poor and you know you will never see it again, but you find it again because it will give a return, in the sense that it will do some good. Karen and I recently saw the musical *Les Misérables*. The story is based on the grace of the bishop giving Jean Val Jean the silver and not pressing charges because everyone knows he stole it, and Jean Val Jean becomes a businessman, a leader and in some sense a saviour within France. The bishop's bread was cast upon the waters and he found it again in the life of a reformed man.

The Teacher's instruction is positive, cast your bread, take a risk with your wealth and gifts, use them, give them to others, and after a long time (many days) you will see a reward. We would say, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

This thought has been in my head a lot this week and I am quite excited by it but being a cautious and sensible man, I can easily persuade myself, to put the brakes on, isn't that risky, will it not be more likely the poor person will waste the money, or the ship that I have invested in will sink. We can however be reassured that such thinking is not foolish because the teacher is also thinking like this and he has anticipated the likelihood of disaster, and he gives us a second piece of instruction in (v2). Yes, there may be a looming disaster, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't cast our bread simply that we should divide what you invest, not only in one, but in seven, in fact invest in eight. Yes, that person may disappoint but you have seven other chances that you will get a return, and your ship may sink in the storms, but you still have seven other opportunities for return. We have a similar saying do not put all our eggs in one basket. His advice therefore in view of the uncertainties of life is to take the risk, be generous and be liberal in your giving and investments.

That is the Teacher's advice, and it challenges us because we tend to be cautious and risk adverse. However, when we consider the views Jesus held, we see a similar view. Jesus told his disciples a story with the same point, a story of talents given to different individuals which we read in Matthew 25:14-30. One was given 5, another 2 and another one. The only one who was not commended in fact he angered the giver of the talents was the one who was afraid and hid his talent and didn't take the risk and make it work. So Jesus taught that in view of the uncertainties of life his disciples should use their God-given talents a look for a return.

This advice holds in the everyday business of our work, and it holds in the work of the Kingdom of God. We begin our journey in the Kingdom by giving ourselves wholehearted to Jesus, we are the seed who is planted and dies to self, so that a new life in Christ emerges, a new creation. We continue the journey in the kingdom of God using the God given blessings of gifts, talents, and resources for his kingdom. Yes life is uncertain, but wisdom tells us to take the risk and we will see a return. Now that is a challenge and exciting. Each of us have a responsibility to think through what that looks like for us.

What does it mean for us when faced with the need of the Ukrainian people? What will us casting our bread look like? How can we give to the people of Ukraine? Everyone can give some money, use the Moderators appeal, give a room in your house, register with the Irish Red Cross. The elders have decided to support a Christian mercy mission from Porto Portugal associated with the CPV church community. On your behalf we have paid for a van of supplies to help people in Ukraine and help bring people back to Portugal and safety. We have registered the church as a possible community centre space for Ukrainian refugees

and let us pray that God would give us the contacts we need to be of help and support to a people brutally ravaged by war.

Take a risk, with what you have been given by God, give your life and your resources in life. In view of possible disaster, don't hold back but be generous and active, take a risk with life.

II. Take the risk and do not be over cautious (v3-4)

The Teacher wants to remind us that not everything in life is uncertain. Life is uncertain but there are some things that we can know. Dark, heavy clouds will pour rain. When a tree falls, wherever it falls it remains, these things are laws of nature that are certain in an uncertain world. However, many of us demand a level of certainty that stops us doing our work, or taking a risk, and getting on. I might want the perfect sunny day, with no wind to ride my bike but if I insist on that then I'll not be out very often. When we demand ideal conditions, we are likely to miss opportunities to do something. At some point we need to take the risk.

As I said this thought of taking a risk has been in my head. I had my hair cut this week and settled into the chair when the Holy Spirit prompted me about taking a risk. Now of course for some of you starting a conversation is not overly risky but for someone like me I find it hard enough. But I started the conversation and 30 minutes later we were still talking about Ballycastle, and Derry places my hairdresser loved and of course I knew well. I gave her my card so that she knew that I was who I said I was. The bread is cast, the risk was worth it, who knows what the return may yet be.

There may never be ideal conditions before we speak to our friends of Jesus. Or ideal conditions before inviting people over, or ideal conditions before joining a club or starting a new hobby. If we wait for the ideal conditions, there is a good chance we will never get important things done. We may regret later in life things we would love to have done but didn't do. Take the risk even when the situation is not ideal.

III. Task the opportunity to work despite not knowing everything (v5-6)

The Teacher tells us there are things you do not know, the path of the wind for example. Or how the body is formed in the womb, even with all our medical and scientific advances, we still do not know all there is to know about how our bodies are formed in the womb. The alternative reading in the NIV is helpful, "*you do not know how life enters the body being formed*". This is true, we do not know when and how life enters the body being formed. These things are the work of God. The wind and the giving of life to an unformed child and we cannot understand the work of the God, the Maker of all things. Maker can mean creator but more likely in this context it means the one who makes things happen or not, the sovereign control God has over all things that we cannot understand. So, for people who believe in a God who makes things and makes things happen there is a real stability, a base and anchor that helps in the uncertainty of life. When we do not know, we understand that God, the Maker, does!

Note again what we are to do with the uncertainty of not knowing everything. The teacher tells us to be diligent in work and take the opportunities given and we may be successful. Personally, I have been thinking a lot about my use of time in the evenings. What should be done in the evenings when there are no meetings, and study is done, is that the time for rest, entertainment, hobby, or relationships, or work? The instruction given is to work both in the morning and the evening, to use your time throughout the day.

Why because there a chance that what you do at both times will bear fruit and be successful. The instruction is like that in v1, be generous in what you do, be diligent in what you do, work hard at what you do, because God is in control, success may come, we can trust God with the results.

Jesus told a story of the farmer who sowed his seed. He did so liberally, and it went into all sorts of soils, he had no control over the outcome, the depth of soil, the sun that shone, or the weeds that blew into the soil, but he saw a harvest because he sowed, and he did so generously.

If light of the uncertainties of life, if we hold back and do not take the risk, or the opportunities avoided to us by the Maker of all things, if we wait for the perfect conditions and if we always try to figure out what will happen when we just cannot know then we get paralysed in fear and indecision considering the uncertainties of life and nothing happens. The advice of the Teacher is to use the opportunity, take a risk, commit your life to God, be wise and work.

Apply to those who have never committed their life to Jesus. Continue to apply it each day of your journey of discipleship.

With God in control, the Maker of all things, what have you to lose and as you sow in work you just do not know what the outcome will be. Therefore, cast your bread, take a risk, give portions to seven, yes to eight, be generous and wise and sow in the morning and the evening, work hard knowing that God might bless your work with success.

Deuteronomy 15:10 *“Give generously to him (the poor) and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand too.”*

Luke 6:38 *“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure, you use it will be measured to you.”*

Praise: My Heart is Filled with Thankfulness

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: For the Cause

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

In general, we like to be in control and find it difficult to take risks. How is this revealed in our lives?

Consider the imperative verbs the Teacher uses in this passage and the images they bring to mind. Which do you find most helpful and why?

Choose an area of your life (i.e. finances, home, time, talents, relationships, etc.). What might it look like to take wise risks in this area?