

[2017 TH Lenten Study DRAFT ONE of whole document, without illustrations @ 28 October 2016]

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Why the theme 'Risk'?

The city of Christchurch and its surrounding areas suffered significant earthquakes beginning on 4 September, 2010 and six years later occasional after-shocks are still being experienced. No one on 3 September 2010 knew the risks associated with living in this part of New Zealand since the city and region were largely thought to be safe from quakes. And the first quakes in September 2010 did not prepare us for the traumatic quake on 22 February 2011 in which many lives were lost. In the years since many people have chosen to accept the risks of earthquakes and continued living in the region. But we have also craved the security of new or rebuilt homes and places of work which are stronger than before, and we have relished the ways in which subsequent life has become more settled and peaceful.

Meanwhile the general situation in the world has continued, one which increasingly is apathetic or antagonistic towards Christians and the message of Christ we proclaim. The church is dying in some places because of apathy and it is being killed off in other parts because of antagonism. In the specific situation from which these studies arise, the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch (i.e. the geographical region of Canterbury and Westland), decline in numbers of active worshippers and increase in average age of those worshippers sharply poses the question whether we are engaged in the mission of God in ways fit for context. Do we need to lift ourselves above natural human inclinations towards security and settledness and embrace risk taking for the sake of the gospel? We have a strong sense that this question is being asked or ought to be asked through much of the Christian world. The Bible studies in this book are a contribution to answering the question. And there is no better book in the New Testament for thinking about risk taking for Jesus' sake than the book these studies are based on, the Book of Acts.

A final note on the stories of risk taking contributed by six different individuals which form the introductions to the Bible studies. Each story speaks of taking risks, and each personal story has some relationship to the theme for the study it is associated with. But no single story contributed here exactly matches the risk demonstrated in the companion story told in the Acts of the Apostles.

Writers

This year six people associated with the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch, New Zealand, were invited to join with Peter Carrell, Director of Theology House and a previous co-writer in this Theology House series of Lenten Studies.

Liz Giller is an NZCMS mission partner working in Pakistan.

Vivien Harber is Ministry Enabler for the Parishes of Hokitika and Ross-South Westland.

Tessa Laing is an NZCMS mission partner working in Uganda.

Bishop Victoria Matthews is the Bishop of Christchurch.

Spanky Moore is Ecumenical Chaplain of the University of Canterbury and Young Adults Enabler for the Diocese of Christchurch.

Jolyon White is Director of Anglican Advocacy in the Diocese of Christchurch.

For group leaders: how the studies work

We recommend a 60 -- 75 minute programme for the group, plus time for refreshments served at the beginning, end or in the middle of the group's session. **Each group member should have a Bible or a photocopy of the Bible passage to be studied.** Within the explanations of each passage, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is cited.

Here is a guideline:

Icebreaker (5 minutes).

Opening prayer, asking God to speak through the study into our lives.

Read the introduction to the study. This could be read by the group leader, or paragraph by paragraph by group members in turn.

Read the passage from the Acts of the Apostles. It is often a good idea to read around the group, each member reading a couple of verses and the next person carrying on where they left off.

Similarly read the explanation of the passage.

Group members consider the questions in silence. It may help to have pencils and notepaper handy.

Share answers in the group.

Prayer

Praying in Your Study Group

Some groups are well-versed in different ways of praying together. Others include members unaccustomed to praying in an intimate setting. The approach to prayer provided at the conclusion of each study is a suggestion not a recommendation. Groups should feel free to pray in any manner and by any method appropriate to them.

Study 1 Acts 4:1-22

Ice-breaker: Can any of us recall a significant moment when we had to make a decision which meant taking a real risk? What was it like? How did it feel?

Risking Standing Up for Jesus

It's funny how the mists of time can change the way we remember things. The most miserable, heart-breaking, soul-crushing experiences can take on a kind of heroic fable like glow. And I must admit – it's hard to resist the temptation to humble-brag about the risks I've taken in the hope I'll garner a few grams of respect.

I could talk about the time I risked my career by leaving my hip radio announcer job to study theology. Or I could talk about the time I risked my freshly minted marriage and modest finances by attempting to plant a church for my non-Christian mates. All ripping good yarns that make me sound like the kind of Christian Hero I'd love you to think I am.

But at the heart of it, risk is about being willing to lead our lives from a place of faith rather than fear. And for me some of my greatest fears hinge on my fear of failing, and the consequences of officially being labeled FAILURE for the rest of my life. A minister I know of challenges his friends to name out loud something new they're going to try in the new year that has a really good chance of failing. My palms get all clammy at the thought.

Personally, I've found stepping out in faith rather than giving into fear requires quite a lot of practice. Once a year isn't enough! It's a monthly, weekly, daily choice to confront my own fears—and instead to play by Jesus' Kingdom rules. So let me share with you an incredibly dull, boring and pedestrian risk I took recently. It's not very exotic. But most risk isn't.

It was 5.25pm on a Tuesday. I was just beginning to set up the art gallery we use for the Thirsty Workers Guild evenings we host for young adults. A man walks past me, opens the door to leave, and says goodbye to the manager of the venue. He's obviously been here many times before. I think nothing of it, and to be honest I'm mostly praying that everyone will just hurry up and leave so I could get on with setting stuff up.

A few minutes pass, and the man opens the door again. He meets my eyes with a shy smile. "Are you... by chance... Spanky?" I groan inside. I attempt to sound chipper, but probably overdo it. "Yes! Hello! That's me!" "I thought so... My name's Jonathan. I actually went to school with your wife back in the day."

I begin asking him a few polite questions. He's an artist. Just back from a residency overseas. Living down south. About to drive home tonight with his girlfriend. Heading over to Europe next month without any set plans in the hope of making it big. There's a pause in our conversation.

I'm tempted to move him along – after all some of us have a lot of very important stuff to set up! But suddenly I'm aware that I may be a small part actor in a larger unfolding story of God's Kingdom. Why did he go to so much effort to come and say Hi to a person he's never met before for no apparent reason?

And then I get this prompting to take a tiny yet terrifying risk. "Hey Jonathan," I say, trying to project an illusion of spiritual confidence. "I know we've only just met, and I don't want to freak you out or anything, but can I pray for you?" Jonathan instantly turns red. Little does he know I'm turning red on the inside as well. "Errrrm. Sure thing. If you want," he replies. And so in the entrance to the art gallery I place my hand on his shoulder. And I mumble some half-baked prayer affirming God's love of creativity and asking for safe travels over the coming months. And I say Amen. He awkwardly mumbles thank you before shuffling out the door and into his car. I never hear from him again. And I don't know what Jesus is up to in Jonathan's life.... But in that moment I chose to live out of faith rather than fear. Because sometimes taking a risk for Jesus just doesn't sound that impressive.

Read the passage: Acts 4:1-22

Reflections on the passage

Acts rocks along at a quick pace in its first few chapters. Chapter One tells us of Jesus' last days between being raised from the dead and being taken up into heaven (called "Ascension"), concluding with a waiting period in Jerusalem before something else happens. That something is the beginning of Chapter Two, when the Holy Spirit comes on the waiting disciples in a spectacular fashion, so spectacular that people think they are drunk at 9 am in the morning and Peter is inspired to stand up to preach, explaining what has happened. The result is also spectacular as thousands are converted to Jesus and to following in his ways. Thus the church is born, and the movement Jesus had begun when he started preaching in Galilee (to the north of Jerusalem) gathers mighty momentum.

In Chapter Three, we read the story of how Peter and John have stood up for Jesus, speaking the message of Jesus to a crowd of people who gathered round them after a dramatic healing (Acts 3). Now, in Chapter Four, there are consequences for the risk they have taken. They are arrested and placed in custody (4:3). No doubt the popularity of their message did not help their cause (4:4). Next they are on trial before the heavyweight Jewish religious authorities of their day (4:5-7). But Peter turns the tables on his accusers by making a counter-accusation: the man healed (Acts 3) has been healed "*by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified*". Peter boldly tells his accusers that the power at work in this healing is precisely the power of the same man they had recently rejected (4:8-12).

Peter takes a great risk with this speech. Why shouldn't the assembled Jewish leadership seek his execution? Although our passage does not say it, an implied consideration of the leadership as they discuss what to do (4:13-17) is the popularity of Peter and John (note 4:21). They determine that the best they can do is to attempt to put a lid on the situation by ordering them to "*speak no more to anyone in this name*" (4:18). (The "name" here is the name of Jesus). But Peter and John will have

none of that. Boldly they take another risk by refusing to bow to this demand (4:19-20). They will go on speaking *“about what we have seen and heard”* (4:20).

Actually, the impulse driving Peter and John forward with their message about Jesus is more strongly expressed in 4:20, *“for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* In an important sense this report sums up the whole story of the initial spread of Christianity: the followers of Jesus felt compelled to share their excitement about Jesus.

Thus Acts continues through its succeeding chapters sharing the excitement of the followers of Jesus as they witness not only what they had seen and heard when Jesus was with them, but also what they now see and hear as the same power of God at work in them.

Peter and John took the risk of standing up for Jesus. In doing so they stood firm for the good news they believed Jesus wanted to share with the world. If they had not taken the risk, it is possible that the mission of Jesus entrusted to them would have been stopped in its tracks.

On this occasion Peter and John’s risk did not lead to their death. In this series of studies we do not engage with the story of Stephen, another bold witness for Jesus, recounted in Acts 6:8-7:60. He took the same risk as Peter and John but the authorities did not let him off and he was stoned to death. One of the onlookers was Saul (who became known as Paul) and we will meet him in studies three through six.

QUESTIONS

- How would you describe the risk Peter and John took?
- Why was it worth taking that risk?
- What was at stake when they refused to back down under pressure?
- In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit at work in this story?
- In what ways may we be challenged today to risk standing up for Jesus?

PRAYER

Reflect silently on the passage from Acts and the discussion we have just had.

With our theme for the study in mind, Risking Standing Up for Jesus, we may wish to ask God for help in some way or we may want to give thanks for God’s help in our life.

The following prayer could be prayed aloud by one person in the group or by the group as a whole.

Loving God,
thank you for Peter and John
who took the risk of standing up for Jesus.
Thank you for their inspiring example.
May we also share in their courage
and be willing at all times to speak for Jesus,
in whose name we pray. Amen.