



Third Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



1 May 2022

Peter's Story

Today invites us into a story. Stories transport us into another time and place, but at the same time they touch our minds and hearts here and now. They reveal truths we might not have recognised and, through imagination, jostle parts of ourselves that have been long buried. For this reason, stories have the power to wake us up, turn us around and move us forward.

Last week, teaching about Jesus showing Thomas the wounds on his hands and side, Fr Matthew challenged me with his question: Are we brave enough to show our own woundedness? To be real and less than perfect, in ways that set others free and bring healing in our community?

One of the reasons we often hide our wounds, from others and from ourselves, is shame. Brené Brown has studied shame and vulnerability and says that, while shame makes us feel small, flawed, and never good enough, it grows with secrecy. We avoid talking about it at all costs, and yet we don't heal if we don't talk about it. Another deeply wounding feeling that is connected to shame is the one of regret. Regret condemns with the knowledge that there is no way to go back and fix our own story by changing whatever we wish we did or did not do.

The weight of that word "regret" keeps our pain and wounds buried deep in the tomb of our own memories. There is a saying, "You can't heal what you don't feel", yet, if you are in any way like me, I don't even want to name or remember some things, let alone feel them.

There is no going back to change anything.

This is not a very "Easter-y" sermon, is it?

Three weeks ago, we journeyed with Jesus to the cross, through the tomb and witnessed the resurrection: new life, redemption, the stone being rolled away. So why all this talk of wounds and shame and regret today? Because if there is no going back, only moving forward, story is one of the gentlest ways to reach in and carry us there.

As we enter this story, it is the story of Jesus the Christ, the story of his disciples, and of Simon Peter. And I hope it touches us in a way that says this is also the story of you, or of me, or of someone you love. Nothing is said directly, but in the beautiful ways in which stories are woven, we realise this is a story that confronts shame and regret and failure ... and what happens "after".

Now all the best stories include repetition, and recognition of familiar echoes by the listeners, and in stories the most powerful lessons are learned and changes take place when something happens in a set of three. And all the best stories begin with an opening formula, so here is mine:

Once upon a time, Kgale kgale, Kudala-dala (actually it was in February this year), I told the story of when Jesus called his first disciples. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishing at night on the Sea of Galilee. Having caught nothing all night, they were on the shore at daybreak, where Jesus found Simon Peter cleaning his nets. After Jesus borrowed Peter's boat, he persuaded him to cast his net just one more time. Two boats nearly sank under the weight of the fish, and Jesus ended with the famous words: Follow me.

Today's story feels like a flash back – a type of déjà vu. This time, there are seven disciples, but again, Simon Peter is in the spotlight. Once again, the fishermen have spent a night at sea. Once again, they have failed at catching fish.

They may feel despondent and bewildered, because of other ways – real and imagined – in which they have failed. For three years they lived faithfully in answer to Jesus' call: Follow me, and I will teach you to catch not fish, but people. Yet here they are, catching fish again. Maybe after the trauma of the last few weeks, they have returned to the comfort of what is familiar. Jesus had appeared to them already, telling them this was not the end, but how could they possibly know what to do next? It felt like the end.

In our story from February, Jesus went and found the men in their own setting, seeing them for who they were, calling them because of who they were. Today, at this new sunrise, Jesus goes to find them and remind them of who they have become. And He knows what they need.

“Cast your nets one more time”, he says, “but this time, on the other side of the boat”.

And miraculously, once again, the net is full of fish, and we are reminded, along with the disciples, that the calling to fish for people has not ended: the church will grow as God's body on earth because of the actions of these people, who, at each new dawn, are learning to live in a whole new, post-resurrection way.

Jesus gathers his exhausted and bewildered inner circle and makes them breakfast. He has provided the fire and also the fish. Verse 13 and 14 state, “Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

We are supposed to hear the echo of the words of the Eucharistic feast as he handed them the bread. We remember, just as he told us to. We remember that, just as Jesus has given himself, loved and served them, they too will give themselves, love and serve others. And so will we. There is a way forward and it starts with the ordinary and 'everyday' – a fire on the beach and a breakfast of fish – but we learn to find God's grace, what is sacred, healing and holy, in what we first considered to be just ordinary.

And now, following our theme of shame and regret, how does Peter feel when Jesus' attention turns to him? On the night Jesus was handed over to death, standing beside a small charcoal fire, Peter had three times disowned Jesus. Much has been written about this exchange between Peter and Jesus and I'm sure it's not new to you. I think this year, if I put myself in Peter's place, rather than understanding this with my head, I need to feel it with my heart.

The one who had boasted the most, the one with all the fight and bravado was feeling small, remembering his betrayal, standing next to a small charcoal fire on the beach. He looks his friend in the eye expecting to hear, “I told you so.” How does he even begin to ask forgiveness? How can he deny, or excuse, or go back and undo what he has done?

Jesus does the unexpected: he does not ask Peter, “Are you sorry for your sin?” He does not ask, “Aren't you ashamed? Don't you feel guilty?” Jesus frees Peter from the regret that takes him backwards. Jesus is not ignoring the past. But he is showing Peter the way forward. Three times Peter denied Jesus. The threefold repetition of the question, “Do you love me?” is surely not lost on Peter.

We read that ‘Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”’

I think Peter becomes more agitated with each question, “Do you love me?” because each one peels back a layer of his shell, exposing his vulnerability. Jesus doesn't need to be convinced or persuaded by Peter's answer. It is Peter who needs to hear himself three times, to be reassured that he is known fully, from the inside out.

In many Bibles where we find this passage, the publishers clearly don't want us to miss the moral of the story, so this section appears under the heading “Peter is reinstated.”

Peter hears and understands that he has value. He is still trusted with the task that came when Jesus gave him his new name: “You are the rock on which I will build my church.” Jesus did not withdraw Peter's calling, but instead He sent Peter forward with the instruction, “Feed my sheep.” Not out of duty, or guilt, or shame, but because Jesus forgives us and loves us.

If we are looking at the transformation required to set us free from shame and regret today, it's no accident that the lectionary also includes the reading Acts chapter 9, about Saul on the road to Damascus. I won't take more time now to follow the details of this story but if it's not familiar, please do read it and imagine what regret Saul must have felt when faced with Jesus asking him, “Why do you persecute me?”

Whatever our guilt or regret, we may wish for nothing but the ability to re-write our own past. But the story is told. What's done cannot be undone. The words that we have spoken, cannot be unspoken.

In our liturgy, at the time of confession, we pray three times: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. For me, these sacred words, an expression of our vulnerability and of God's grace, harmonise with an echo of Jesus asking us three times, "Do you love me?" Because in this imagined exchange, I learn what Peter learned next to charcoal fire that morning on the beach:

Each time that we turn ourselves towards the one who meets us at our own fireside, wherever that may be, then, just as the resurrected Christ appeared to his followers, and just as each new day the truth of Easter became their reality, so too it becomes ours. Life triumphs over the grave. Love is stronger than sin and death.

Our past cannot be re-written. But we learn, along with Peter and with Paul, that in the mercy of God, our story, our wounds, and our past CAN be redeemed.