



Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 20 June 2021

READINGS

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11,19-23)32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

David and Goliath

On June 16th South Africa celebrates Youth Day. It's a celebration of the spirit of young people and their role in our society. It's also a tribute that commemorates the fatal events of June 16th 1976. It seems especially poignant that our lectionary this Sunday leads us to the account of David and Goliath. David, the young shepherd, confronting the giant, armed with just five stones and his sling, reminds us of school pupils in Soweto carrying stones as their only weapons against the police, the defence force and ultimately the violent oppression of the apartheid state.

What happened that day is best told by our elders and parents, members of our own parishes in our dioceses who were present and whose lives were forever changed. Their actions and sacrifices on that day and the days and years that followed marked a turning towards justice and equality for all South Africans.

There could be many similarities between the account of David and Goliath's battle, the battle fought by the youth in 1976, as well as the battles that are facing young people today.

To onlookers, the outcome of the encounter between David and Goliath looked like a foregone conclusion. First, let's look at David's disadvantage. We can set aside our children's Bible pictures of a small boy. Yes, David was the youngest brother but if he were just a small boy it would have been ridiculous for the king to even suggest that David should try his own armour. King Saul was notably tall, and of course Goliath is recorded as a giant, so David's smaller size and youth were a factor, but he was not a child. We read that as he walked around in Saul's armour, it felt uncomfortable, because 'he was not used to it.'

The disadvantage that worried David's brothers and King Saul was that David was inexperienced. Therefore, his anger at the Philistine seemed naïve. His confidence seemed boastful (and it probably was).

His brothers were annoyed with him. They resented his talking to the other soldiers. They mocked him for being a shepherd, overstepping his boundaries and wanting to see the action. They also accused him of greed and arrogance. They said he was too big for his boots. How did he end up in King Saul's presence? Because he reacted with anger. Because he had been asking about the reward for killing Goliath and wanted to know what was in it for him. Because he was the only one brave enough (or some people would say stupid enough) to believe it was possible.

Sometimes we, like the older brothers, judge people's values or question their motives. As a result, we focus more on proving that we are right. We fight among ourselves and the Goliaths of the world can sit back and watch while their power grows.

Sometimes young people are braver than older people. They are idealists. They believe in a better future, but they are too inexperienced to count all the obstacles. Did you hear that 'but'? What if I had said 'They believe in a better future, and they are too inexperienced to count all the obstacles,'? Which is the language of doubt and which is the language of possibility? We are so busy telling them all the reasons why their dream is impossible, while they are sidestepping our fixed mindset with an innovative solution. In today's terms, while I'm struggling with a hands-on task that should take me hours, my grade 8s already know ... there's an app for that! Of course it's annoying. Of course, they are often wrong and they sometimes fail, yet they're prepared to risk and are also just naïve and foolish enough to succeed.

Rather than opposing these two mindsets: the negative, contradictory 'BUT' versus the positive, affirming 'AND', we can acknowledge one another's strengths. We can recognise the wisdom of experience as well as the optimism of youth and stop being so invested in being right. 'We're fighting giants here; we'll take all the ideas and help we can get!'

We've looked at disadvantage; we've looked at mindset – what about tactics? What about David's weapon? The journalist Malcolm Gladwell in his book called David and Goliath challenges the idea of what it means to be the underdog. He researched the genetic condition that could have accounted for Goliath's size, and linked it to the likelihood that he had poor eyesight.

Gladwell's research also showed that the stone that came from David's sling had the stopping power equivalent to a bullet from a .45 caliber pistol. It was a weapon to be feared in the hands of a nimble young man against a lumbering giant with limited sight, weighed down by his own armour.

You needed to know David to believe that he knew the power of the weapon in his hand and that his experience as a shepherd fighting off wild animals was the perfect preparation for this battle. David challenged assumptions and changed the rules.

The youth of the 21st century carry many labels. Generation Z or Gen Z is leaving school and entering the workforce. I'm generalizing here, based on the research and of course this is a very broad description that doesn't apply in all cases. For Gen Z, diversity is the norm. They are generally progressive thinkers. They are digital natives. They are shrewd consumers, financially minded and pragmatic. They are also more prone to mental health challenges than preceding generations and have been described as the loneliest generation. They have internalized the turbulence, violence and stress of the world around them. We are watching them approach the Goliaths of climate change, unemployment, systemic racism and more. For the most part they no longer trust previous generations and our methods, which they consider too cautious and self-serving.

The next generation, Gen Alpha is currently in primary school. We don't know yet how covid 19 is shaping their character or what other world events lie in wait. Already we see an increase in bullying, disconnection and lack of empathy. We worry about their social skills, the impact on their education, their siege mindset and insecurity. Like their world, they are constantly changing and everything must be curated and personalised. Right now they are crafting new weapons in response to the battles around

them. How can we support our young people, both Gen Z and Gen Alpha, to identify the skills that will serve best, not just for the Goliaths of today but for those that will come?

I've left out a key element of the story. Along with David's personal certainty, however mixed his motives may have been, he understood the importance of his role for the future of Israel. To Saul, David says, 'The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.' To Goliath he says, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty.'

It was Saul's role to empower and equip David. It was David's role to choose his weapon and know his strengths.

An example of a contemporary Gen-Z David is the 23-year-old poet, Amanda Gorman, who performed at President Joe Biden's inauguration. Her whole poem and presence are powerful, truthful and inspiring. She spoke these words:

*... we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation.
Our blunders become their burdens.
But one thing is certain,
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy,
and change our children's birthright.*

Young people, when the time comes, may you know yourselves well and may you know whom it is you are fighting – not the pettiness of your brothers or your peers, not the authority of Saul, your teachers or your parents, but the Goliaths of injustice.

Can we pray that our young people will be anointed for the tasks that lie ahead of them? One day they will face giants that make us tremble. How can we empower them to step forward, speak up and choose well? May God be present to them and to us as their faith is formed while they are in our care.

May Amanda Gorman speak to all of us, young and old, in her words of faith:

*For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*