



# *Tenth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 9 August 2020

### READINGS

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22; Romans 10: 5-15; Matthew 14: 22-33

## *Courage to Act*

In a stormy sea a figure comes walking across the water towards the disciples in their boat. Already in crisis, challenged by wind and waves and thrown about, they call out, "It's a ghost." They hear their friend reply, "Courage, it is I, do not fear". When Jesus climbs into the boat, the wind and waves settle. No longer is this a ghost or teacher or friend. They respond to the events with worship, and with the revelation: "Truly you are the Son of God."

Can you imagine when Peter, even as an adult man, goes home and tells his mother about when he stepped out of the boat to walk on the water, in a storm, because Jesus said, "Come." As a parent you might say, "What were you thinking?" I'm not sure which part of the story he would highlight – his spur of the moment challenge, his courageous leap over the edge, his few moments of absolute wonder as he joined Jesus in this miraculous experience, or maybe the fear and horror when he noticed the wind and waves and began to sink, his crying out "Lord save me," or the moment that Jesus caught his hand.

I'm interested in Peter's decisive action to step boldly out of the boat onto the water. I also want to link that rash decision with a different story from the Bible, in our Old Testament reading today. Young Joseph with the fancy coat is annoying his brothers and making them jealous to the point that they want to kill him. And Reuben, the eldest, speaks up, intervening: Don't kill him. Let's just throw him into this dry well and leave him there. Reuben plans to come back, rescue Joseph and return him to their father.

Reuben's intervention, his impulsive and decisive NO to save Joseph's life, changed the course of history for the people of Israel.

Peter in his moment of courage and inspiration, seeing in Jesus the fullness of all that he could be, created a pivotal moment for the disciples but also for Peter as he began to make the impossible possible. Even if just for a moment, he embodied the man he would be, the rock on whom God would build the church.

I'm talking about leadership. The ability to take decisive action in a storm. It's those people who are unafraid that we rely on in times of crisis. Call them impetuous or foolish, and Peter definitely had that reputation, they do not let fear and doubt stop them when it counts most. In retrospect we can judge people of good intention for what they did, but how much more do we judge good-hearted people for what they didn't do. For their silence. Nine brothers would have left Joseph dead in the desert if Reuben had not spoken up when he did. Peter may never have stepped up again if he had not had that first experience, testing his faith and trust in who Jesus is.

Here's the thing. For both Reuben and for Peter, the outcome was not what they had imagined or desired. Reuben went back to the well, only to discover that the brothers had sold Joseph into slavery. Peter barely took a step or two before his fear of the wind overcame him. But I'm interested in the courage and the impulse and the decision to ACT.

Let's understand that frequently we can't take credit for an outcome. We're not that powerful that our actions control or guarantee *any* result we desire. God's outcome may look different. Thinking of Reuben and Peter, even our so-called failure to achieve our perfect outcome becomes an opportunity or an opening in which God's purposes and possibilities emerge.

Faith says God will do something with the outcome and every day we place our actions, our decisions, and our judgement calls as an offering of surrender, a sign of our faith in God's loving power. Sometimes we have time to meet and discuss and weigh the consequences and sometimes we can't. When we pause too long to examine the wind and waves, we talk ourselves into doing nothing. As individuals and as a society we reason ourselves into inaction and we become ineffective, because the moment that would have made a difference goes past.

I'm talking about Women's Day today and about August as the month of compassion and women's month. Firstly to honour the courageous actions of the 20 000 women who marched in 1956 and particularly out of respect for the leadership shown by Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu Rahima Moosa and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn and the heritage that lives on because of them.

But I'm also calling us into action and saying, "Don't let this moment pass". When we hear the crying and shouting next door, it's not okay to say "I don't want to get involved." If we heard it, we are involved. When we have that silent family agreement that we don't talk about someone's temper; when we drive past and look away. I'm referring in particular to gender-based violence but also, in this month of compassion, of all types of violence and abuse of power to which we are witnesses. Report abusers. Stop protecting them and making excuses for them. Support survivors. Organise. Don't leave victims out there standing alone against not only their abuser but a whole abusive system. What will it take before we step out of the boat in spite of the wind and waves? We can only change the culture by collective action and, with faith, we can lead the way. It can start with speaking up when a sexist or racist joke is told in our presence; when someone is demeaned or objectified because that type of "boys' talk" or racist talk is normalised. Doing something is scary. Doing nothing is worse.

I pray that we will have courage to step out of the boat. I pray most of all that you won't be in danger, and that no one will have to act alone. But please decide to act. I believe God will intervene with us. There is a life-giving outcome that we can set in motion through small but powerful acts of leadership and faith in the storm.

**If you or someone you know needs help, please reach out.**

**LifeLine 0861 322 322**

**SADAG 080 021 2223**

**Stop Gender Violence helpline 0800-150-150**

**POWA Lockdown Counselling Number 076 694 5911 and 011 642 4345/6**