

Receive the Holy Spirit...

... Breathe out and Let Go

A reflection given on Pentecost Sunday, 31st May 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker in the Online Service

John 20:19-23

In recent months, we've perhaps all become more aware of the action of breathing: it's our ability to breathe more than anything else that's attacked by the Corona virus; we've been aware at an earlier stage of the outbreak of the possible shortage of ventilators needed to help those most afflicted, to breathe; and breathing can even sometimes be dangerous - the face mask has become a common sight in the western world for the first time, designed to stop us breathing infection on one another. And on a quite different track, there are riots going on in the United States at the moment following the death of George Floyd, apparently killed by a policeman kneeling on his neck and whose last words, "I can't breathe", have become the rallying call of protesters.

Breathing is so obvious that we take it for granted. But if we don't breathe, we die: breathing is the chief sign of life; when you breathe, you can't see it or catch it or use it for anything; there's a freedom about breathing and breath. But there is also something stable about it: breathing undergirds my life with a continuous rhythm, awake or asleep; it provides the framework and pattern without which nothing else can happen.

On this Pentecost Sunday, John's Gospel speaks of Jesus, newly raised from the dead, appearing in the upper room amongst his astonished disciples and 'breathing on them'. "Receive the Holy Spirit", he says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." At first sight, this seems like an odd combination: what have Jesus's breath, the Holy Spirit and forgiveness to do with each other? It's partly a play on words - the Greek word for breath can also be translated as spirit and vice versa, so the spirit of Jesus is also the holy breath and he's telling the disciples that God is breathing in them and through them, so that they are sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus himself.

When we breathe out, we are releasing into the world the impurities from our lungs, the unwanted carbon dioxide, and by expelling the waste, we're making room to breathe in the life-giving oxygen. I think that's what Jesus means when he links the Holy Spirit with forgiveness. When he talks here about forgiving people their sins, he doesn't mean forgiveness simply in the obvious sense, where I say, "Sorry for hurting you." And you say, "That's all right, I forgive you." That's part of it, but it's broader than that. The line in the Lord's Prayer about 'forgiving us our sins' could also be translated as 'forgive us our debts'. Forgiveness in this sense is about being set free from our sense of failed obligations, of being released from the burden of 'not measuring up'. When Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto his disciples and tells them they can forgive the sins of any, he's giving them the power to set people free from their sense of having disappointed others, of being judged and found wanting.

So at Pentecost, we're celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church: the breath of the risen Lord Jesus flowing into the lives of those who feel they've failed; those who feel they don't measure up; those who feel that all they do is disappoint others. And what's even more amazing is that Jesus not only forgives those upon whom he breathes, but he entrusts to his followers the power to set each other free: to let go of the petty resentments; to set aside the burden of being judged and found wanting; to breathe out and let go of that infected impulse to dump our grievances on others.

Pentecost is a festival of new life and a freedom because life and freedom are the natural result of allowing Jesus to breathe through us. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind [or the spirit - that's the same word] blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it's going to. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit." So that's a picture of freedom, of power, and of new life.

So what about you and me? Will we allow Jesus to breathe upon us, setting us free from our sins and from our sense of never quite being what God intended us to be? Will we rejoice in that sense of freedom; of all of life being a gift to enjoy; of the abundant grace and freedom of which breathing itself is a sign? And will we take upon ourselves that commission to set one another free; to give each other permission to fail and to fall short; to breathe out and let go of those crushing expectations we lay on one another, trying to make others conform to the way we think they should be.

Breathing is, of course, also a picture of prayer - Jesus breathing his spirit upon us so that our hearts may be warmed, and fanned into flame, so that we desire what he wills.

And so we pray with the words of the old hymn:

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.*

Reading Texts

John 20:19-23

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'