

Breathe on me, Breath of God

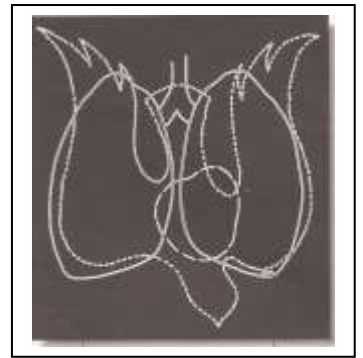
4 June 2017

Revd Jenny Wilkens

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13

John 20:19-23

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



I returned yesterday afternoon from 24 hours in Wellington, where I attended the ordination of Eleanor Sanderson as the newest Bishop in our church, and Assistant Bishop in Wellington. Among many special moments, I found particularly moving the invocation of the Spirit, singing the ancient Latin words 'Veni, Sancte Spiritus' (Come Holy Spirit) to the chant from Taizé.

On my way back to the airport I was able to call in to meet the twin sons of friends who were born at 23 weeks gestation last October, and are now nearly 8 months old, at home and no longer dependent on oxygen to help their breathing. It was very precious to cuddle these much prayed-for little miracles. Today I want to reflect on the image of the Spirit we heard from John's gospel, that of **breath**: "Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

I have always loved the gentleness of this scene which John sets at the end of the first Easter Day when the disciples are still in a state of shock, grief, fear and bewilderment over all that has happened in the last few days, including confusing rumours and accounts that Jesus is alive. They are meeting in fear behind locked doors we are told, but then Jesus comes and stands among them, and greets them with the simple, familiar but oh so profound message of peace: Peace be with you, shalom, wholeness, healing.

Then Jesus breathes on them, and says Receive the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful recapturing of the image of God breathing life into the first human beings in the story of Genesis (2:7).

Breathing – it's as simple as breathing we say, but yet breathing is its own miracle, as anyone of us knows who has breathing difficulties at times. And here I want to draw on some insights that come from a priest who is also a retired doctor ¹ who has worked both as an obstetrician and in hospice care, so is very aware of what the breath of life means at both the beginning and end of life. He makes some interesting comparisons between the breathing process and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Life-giving air with its oxygen is all around us, every moment, we can't see it or smell it, but we can't live without it and our bodies soon feel the effects if we are without it for long. So we see and feel the *effects* of the oxygen on our

¹ Rev Dr Jonathan Hartfield, article "Breath of Life", 1998, source unknown.

bodies, rather than the oxygen itself. In the same way we don't see the Holy Spirit of God, but only feel and see the effects in our lives and the lives of others as we breathe in God's Spirit and live through that life-giving presence.

Pentecost is often called the birth-day of the church but I want to think about our own birth-day, the day we were born, when we took our first breath of life. Apparently we start breathing a long time before birth in our mother's womb but we don't breathe air, only fluid, and though this trains our muscles and brains for when we will breathe air, at this stage it doesn't open or expand our lungs. Our mother breathed for us, giving us the oxygen we needed through the placenta.

Then at birth, the baby draws its first breath, fills its lungs with air, life-giving oxygen, and often with a great bellow, is breathing – alive and kicking! And everyone else around breathes a great sigh of relief!

A parallel has been made between this and baptism, what we call our spiritual birth, our birth from above, from God, when we receive God's Holy Spirit and are welcomed into God's family, the Church, and commissioned for ministry. Perhaps we could say that before baptism, we are still in the spiritual womb, as it were, we have not yet received all that God intends and longs to give us in spiritual life and power. Then in baptism we are born into spiritual life, launched out into ministry with all that powerful imagery of living water, born of water and the Spirit. And sometimes when a baby is baptised, we also hear that cry as a baby feels rather indignant about having water poured on them, draws breath and yells to let us know all about it!

The one baptised is now breathing on their own, and is called to breathe in the life of God's Spirit day by day through prayer, through feeding on God's word in the Scriptures, filling our spiritual lungs if you like so our spiritual life blood is oxygenated and healthy, our body fit and ready to give out in God's service. Perhaps there's the challenge: that balance of breathing in and breathing out. Some of us may be prone to hyperventilation, I know I have been at times, that's where you over-breathe, breathe in too fast and shallowly, leading to tingling fingers and feeling spaced out and dizzy, sometimes going into muscle spasms. The need then is to slow down and deepen your breathing.

Perhaps there's a spiritual hyperventilation – we can talk about being on a spiritual high, but perhaps we can get so hung up on experiences of God's Spirit, that we forget that God's Spirit is sent to give us spiritual life and spiritual power for ministry and service, not just for feel-good experiences! The Corinthian Christians had to learn that, with their enthusiasm for exciting spiritual gifts, rather than seeing that those gifts are given for the whole body of Christ to use in serving God's needy world.

Sometimes though it does seem that God gives us a bigger ‘dollop’ of the Spirit, the boost we need to fulfil a particular task or ministry, perhaps to help someone or to know the right word to say or thing to do.

It’s a little like when we need an adrenaline surge to run to do something in a crisis or emergency. When we run, our breathing gets faster, our lungs expand, we draw in more oxygen so we can get where we need to go, fast. It’s like a power surge to achieve things we couldn’t normally do.

Often it’s when we’re at the end of our own resources and cry out to God for help, that God’s Spirit empowers us to do or say something that we never thought we could in our own strength.

In our Gospel reading, we hear the order of events: ‘Jesus said, As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he’d said this, he breathed on them and said Receive the Holy Spirit’ (John 20:21, 22).

Before we can be sent out in God’s name into God’s world, we need to receive day by day the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus to empower us, to give us the strength we need - and the sensitivity and the love to share with God’s grace.

How’s your breathing today? How’s your spiritual breathing?

Today the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, let’s remember our physical birth-day when we first breathed the breath of life, and let’s give thanks to God too for our spiritual birth-day when we breathed in the life of the Holy Spirit of God.

You might want to say, well, I certainly can’t remember the day I was born (perhaps that’s a good thing!), and also like most Anglicans, I’m really not sure when my spiritual birth-day was or is...

But perhaps there’s a bigger question?

Are you breathing right now? Yes, well then, you’re alive.

Are you breathing spiritually now, seeking to breathe in the spiritual life of God through the Spirit today, as you come to worship, to pray, to listen to God, to receive Christ’s life in the eucharist? You are? Well, then you’re spiritually alive. And that is what really matters.

I want to conclude with a prayer that is a verse from a Pentecost 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.²

² Breathe on me Breath of God, words: Edwin Hatch, tune: Carlisle