

Pentecost Sunday 2018 'Breathe'

A man lies on the ground. His body is limp, lifeless. He lies still, so still it is as if he is formed of the very ground itself. Earth of earth, dust of dust. The man is lifeless, but the earth isn't. All around, abundant life bursts into bloom – wild and free. Flowers and trees, streams and rivers, birds and butterflies, the joyful cacophony of creation.

And still the man lies... but then a Presence appears. You can't see it, but it is as if creation bows as the Presence approaches the man. It leans over him, and breathes (BREATH). Breathes.... into his nostrils. And, slowly but surely, the man moves. The breath of life is within him. He pushes up on his now-strengthening hands, rises off the floor. Unsteadily he climbs to his feet, and looks around at the verdant creation which stretches around him in every direction. He has become a living soul. Life is within him.

Breathe. (PAUSE)

An old man wanders through the desert. He is tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep, just like he does every day. He is tired, and bored. Bored of being nobody, of living in exile, of working for his father-in-law even at such an advanced age. He remembers the glories of his youth – but only just. It was 40 years ago. He approaches the mountain, looking for pasture, when something catches his eye. A bush – burning, but not burning. Flames of fire, but no smoke or tinder. Heat and light, but the bush survives. What is this magic? How can it be?

A voice speaks to him. A voice which knows about his past and prepares him for his future. A voice of life, of hope, but also of risk. A voice he can't ignore. But whose is it? He asks – who shall I say is sending me. YHWH, YHWH, YHWH. The sound of breathing. The eternal I am. Yahweh. The breath of life. The Lord breathed into another man, and the man became once more truly alive.

Breathe. (PAUSE)

A prophet walks in a valley. The ground is dry and dusty, only a few straggly plants grow limply through the hard, cracked earth. The prophet looks around him. The valley is full of bones, scattered here and there. Thousands of bones. He walks to and fro, to and fro, surveying the scene. The valley of death. Who were they? Why are they here? Can these bones live?

A voice speaks – and suddenly the prophet is aware that the voice is now his voice. *He* is speaking to the bones, but more than that, he is breathing on them. The breath of life (BREATH). And as he breathes and speaks, speaks and breathes, the bones begin to rattle. They join together, tendons and muscles, sinews and skin. Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live. A people renewed, hope restored, the breath of life indeed.

Breathe. (PAUSE)

A group of men gather in a small room in a crowded city. The door is locked, for they gather in fear. They thought they were brave, but... their revolution barely started. Their leader is gone, dead. And they are alone. Alone in a big city, with plenty of enemies. Afraid.

Rumours abound. A tomb is empty. Friends of friends are saying things, things they've seen, someone alive. But they've been there, done that. They let themselves believe, and look where it got them. Only one of them has the courage to venture out for some food and wine. They'll eat, quickly and quietly – and then tomorrow, they'll be out of here: hidden among the crowds of pilgrims heading home, and hoping no-one spots their northern accents.

'Peace be with you.' Who said that? 10 startled faces whirl around towards the still-locked door, and.... can it be true? Is that.... him? Is that really you? 'Peace be with you.' His hands outstretched in welcome, great scars on each wrist. It is! It's him! A moment's awe and then... noise! Sobbing, shouting, back-slapping, hugging – a wave of emotion bounces round the room.

And then... he raises his hands. The room falls quiet. People wipe their eyes and gaze intently at him. He says nothing. Nothing, at first. He just... breathes. Breathes around the room. 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' The breath of life. The foretaste of heaven. Humanity restored. Adam renewed. The Lord God breathed into them, and they became, in a new way, living souls.

Breathe. (PAUSE)

Seven weeks later, those same men, with about 100 others, are back in town. They gather as before, but they are no longer afraid, no longer listless. Their lives are full of purpose – but they are waiting. For more than purpose: for power. Power poured out for the sake of the world. For the sake of the One to whom they have given their lives. They are waiting, just as he told them to. Waiting, and hoping, and praying, and hoping, and waiting.

Outside, the streets buzz with the sounds of thousands of pilgrims. It is festival time, and people have travelled from all over the world to be here. They can hear foreign accents, and the smell of roasted meat and baked bread fills their nostrils. But food can wait. Where is the gift? Where is the promise? When will it come?

A breeze flutters through the window. The shutters rattle, and cool air floods the room. Welcome wind on a hot, airless day! But the breeze lingers, it grows. Where does it come from? The drapes on the walls start to flap wildly, hair blows into faces, the plates stacked in the corner wobble and crack.

And still the wind grows. A mighty breath, the breath of life. It *howls*, it is like being on the top of Mount Sinai in a storm, only inside a room in Jerusalem. Cleansing, burning wind. The group are sure they can see flames of fire in this wind, and each flame rests on a person. Like the burning bush, there is heat and light, but no smoke or danger. Like the valley of bones, there is life.

And still the wind blows. And as it blows, each person suddenly becomes aware of their neighbour, speaking gobbledygook, or maybe not gobbeldeygook, maybe that's... yes, they've heard those words before. They don't understand them, but they're the words drifting in from outside, a dozen languages. The breath of life flows out of them, and before they know it, they're out in the streets speaking and shouting and the wind blows where it pleases. A crowd gathers, a word is spoken, a revolution is born.

Breathe. (PAUSE)

Today is Pentecost, a day when we celebrate the pouring of God's Holy Spirit in the world, on all who follow Jesus. A day when the disciples are clothed with power from on high, when true change and obedience to God becomes possible because God himself dwells with us and within us.

But how do we speak of it? What does it look like? The word Spirit literally means breath or wind. It is the breath of life. It is the breath of God which enables us to be truly human, the people He meant for us to be. It is also a mighty wind, a sign of power. The wind blows: all He longs for us to do is to breathe it in.

Breathe.

So often today we hear those who doubt our immortality, the presence of a soul within us. It is fashionable to see us as just carbon, Adam, the dust of the earth. But all we have to do is breathe, slowly. It's that simple. Breathe. And every breath reminds us of the life God has given us. The Lord God breathed into the man, and the man became a living soul. The Lord God breathed upon the bones, and the bones sprang to life. Jesus breathed on the disciples and they received the Spirit.

Breathe.

The Christian faith is not just a set of doctrines, of values or even behaviours. It is relationship. It is a journey with and into the presence of God. It is God with us. In his creative power, in His Son, and in the breath of life. At Pentecost, the breath becomes a wind. It roars through the world, it blows where it pleases. Those who feel its force are forever changed.

Perhaps you know the power of that wind. Perhaps today is the day to ask for that power again. Or perhaps God is simply calling you to breathe. Breathe in the breath of life. Let God be the breath in your lungs, the life within you, that *your* every breath is lived in him, through him and for him.

The Spirit is poured out. The wind blows. And God says to you today: breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Amen.