

## Sermon 31.5.20 PENTECOST

What is the difference between breath and air? Four years ago a book was published called *When Breath Becomes Air*. It's the auto-biography of a talented young neurosurgeon who is unexpectedly diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer – the book movingly describes his struggle to come to terms with having a terminal illness, his fight against the cancer and his subsequent death. It is also the story of how he learns, even as his body is failing, what it really means to 'live'. What is the difference between breath and air? **It is life.** Breathing – respiration – is the process by which our bodies take and use oxygen in the air around us to give us life. **'Breath' indicates 'life'.**

**Breath indicates life.** Think newborn baby – that first independent gulp of air and cry – alive! Think of Aslan the lion breathing over the stone statues in CS Lewis's story *Lion the Witch & the Wardrobe* bringing them back to life again. Think of God in Genesis chapter 2 breathing into the nostrils of the man he has just formed from dust and how, in that moment, the man becomes 'a living being'; think of mouth to mouth resuscitation – the breath from one human being giving life to another. In story, in scripture, in everyday life – especially and poignantly at this time when coronavirus has robbed so many of their ability to breathe : we are more aware than ever that **breath is life**. I want to hold onto this thought as we look at today's readings.

Today we celebrate *Pentecost* - the 'birthday' of the church – the moment when God gives His Holy Spirit to the first disciples and the church, the new 'body' of Christ on earth, is born. It is no coincidence that the Hebrew word used in the Bible for 'Spirit' can also mean 'wind' and 'breath'.

Both of our readings today describe the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost but they describe it very differently.

In our first reading from the book of Acts which Isaac read for us, the coming of the Holy Spirit is described as an immensely powerful experience – the disciples *hear* a sound 'like the rush of a violent wind' that fills the whole house; they *see* what looks to them like flames of fire ; and they begin to *speak* uncontrollably in languages they've never learned. The Spirit's presence is unmistakable and it draws a crowd of passers-by who are mystified by what

they see and hear. It is left to Peter, empowered by the Spirit, to explain and interpret what is happening. Three thousand people are converted.

John's gospel describes a very different Pentecost. It happens on the evening of Easter day. The disciples are shut away in a locked room, fearful and troubled about events. Suddenly the crucified and risen Jesus appears in the room and gives them ..... *Peace*. Their fear turns to joy and Jesus commissions them and *breathes* on them saying "Receive the Holy Spirit". The Greek word used here for Jesus' breath is the only time this word appears in the whole of the NT. The writer of John's gospel wants us to think about God **breathing life** into the nostrils of Adam in that first act of creation; "Look," he's saying – "it's happening again – a new, second act of creation: God the Son breathing new life into his disciples: the creation of his church".

In John's gospel, the disciples *hear*, not the sound of a violent wind, but words of peace; they *see*, not tongues of fire, but the wounds of crucifixion in his hands; in the *words* of their own language they are commissioned, and in Jesus' **life-giving breath** they receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Two very different descriptions of Pentecost - but the same Spirit: the **life-breathing Spirit** of God given to empower Jesus' disciples to continue the work Jesus began: the work of proclaiming God's kingdom to people from every nation on earth.

So what does a Church '**alive**' – filled with **the life, the breath of God's Spirit look like**? What does it mean for us at SJOJ to be a church led, inspired & empowered by God's Spirit?

I think it means the same for us today as it did for those first disciples: our task is the same as theirs - to help people to know God. At Pentecost, people were drawn into God's kingdom both by *hearing* Peter's words of explanation and by *seeing* the communal life of the disciples: a communal life shaped by prayer and joyful praise, where people found healing, each individual was equally valued, a life of mutual care where each put the needs of others first and where there was a particular concern for the poor.

We may not be able to meet together at the moment, but the church of SJOJ is very much **alive**. Within our individual homes *I know* we are continuing to pray,

to be shaped by God's word through daily readings and Sunday acts of worship, to sing hymns and spiritual songs (even if it's via Zoom!); I *know* our healing group prays every day, that individual members are encouraging one another through phone calls and socially distanced visits, that those in need are being cared for. We are not just existing, biding time. SJOJ is very much **alive**. If all this is happening now - just imagine the spirit of joyful praise and celebration there's going to be when we are finally allowed to all meet back together again. Who knows how many passers-by will be drawn in by the sound of it!

At Pentecost the Spirit comes as a violent wind and as a gentle breath, with tongues of fire and with the wounds of crucifixion, in languages which witness to others and in words which speak to our own hearts. Wherever you are celebrating Pentecost today, may God's Holy Spirit bless you, refresh you and bring you life today. Amen.