

The Breath of Life

The following sermon was preached by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell

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‘Jesus said to Peter, “Simon, son of John do you love me?” ...and after this he said to him, “Follow me.”’ (John 21.16,19) ‘Jesus breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.”’ (John 20.22)

Some years ago I took a party of students on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One of the most moving things that I remember from the days we spent there was our visit to Tabgha on the sea of Galilee. We celebrated the Eucharist there on a round, stone altar, with the lake-water lapping on the shore, and nearby the two churches which commemorate on the one hand the feeding of the five thousand – the church of the loaves and fishes; and on the other, Jesus’ searching to question to Peter who had betrayed him – ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ and his command to Peter to feed his sheep. As we heard in our Gospel reading Jesus tells Peter that when he was young he did his own thing, but when he was old ‘you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.’ The end of that journey for Peter was martyrdom in Rome, so alongside that altar at Tabgha by the lake in Galilee I have another memory – a visit to the ‘scavi’ or excavations under the great church of St Peter, somewhere it is always worth trying to see if you find yourself in Rome.

When you go down into the excavations you find yourself in an old Roman cemetery, with large mausolea and narrow streets winding between these big family graves. You come at the end to a red wall, where there are large numbers of graves (Christian graves) crowding towards a central point in the red wall. When I went down into the scavi with Archbishop Rowan on his visit to Pope John Paul we came up into the crypt of St Peter’s; a door was then unlocked which took us around to the other side of the red wall, in which there was a niche, and a reliquary of bones found there towards which all the other graves were pointing. A perspex door was opened and we were allowed through to pray closely in the place where it is believed that the bones of Peter are buried. It was a deeply moving moment. Here was Peter who had responded to the call of Jesus to follow him, and had ended by giving his life for his faith.

Peter was given the strength to do this, as all Christians are given the strength to do this because God gives us, as he gives to those of you being confirmed this morning, his life-giving Spirit. As St John tells it, on the evening of the first Easter Day, the Risen Jesus surprised his disciples by bursting in upon them in a locked room. He breathes on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ We could almost translate those words as Jesus breathing on his disciples and saying *Receive the breath of living holiness*. If St. Luke gives us in his story

of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost a mighty wind from heaven, St. John sees the gift of the Spirit as Jesus breathing into his disciples the very breath of his own life.

And how powerful a symbol that is. We breathe for most of the time without recognising that we are doing so, until we rush up a flight of stairs, or run a race, and find ourselves out of breath. To play a wind instrument you have to learn how to breathe, and sounds as various as the skirl of bagpipes, or the haunting notes of flute, or the wonderful rapid playing of pan-pipes that you find in the music of the Andes, all depend on the controlled and powerful use of breath. And then we can learn to breathe deeply, so as to quieten ourselves and become relaxed and attentive and settle into stillness. So it is not surprising that our human breathing can be used to help us in our praying in enabling us to enter the stillness of the presence of God. But above all, of course, breath is life, and when we cease to breathe we die - or, as the Psalmist puts it from that Hebrew way of looking at things which sees all things in God's hands, *When you take away their breath they die and are turned again to their dust . . .* In the Book of Genesis, in one of the ancient symbolic stories of creation, when God created Adam, the first man, he breathes into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being.

Easter - the victory of love over all that is evil, the triumph of life over death, eternal life, born in the grave - is God's new creation. St. Paul writes, *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old order has passed away, behold the new has come!* And in St John's account of Easter, this moment on Easter evening, when Jesus surprises his disciples with joy as he comes to them in the darkness, despair, and imprisoning fear, and greets them with the word of peace - *Shalom*, that new creation bursts in upon their lives and catches them into Easter life. They share Christ's victory, they are caught up into Resurrection life, into Easter living- and Jesus gives them his life, his strength, his power, the very breath of his being, to be their life. He makes them Easter people. *Receive the breath of living holiness.* And what is holiness? It is likeness to God. Our old English word *godly* - an abbreviation of God-likeness catches it well. And what is likeness to God? It is likeness to Jesus. He is, as St Paul again says, *image of the invisible God*, or as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, *the stamp or seal of God's very being and the brightness of his glory.* As Archbishop Michael Ramsey [like](#) to say- *God is Christlike and in him is no unChristlikeness at all.* In Jesus we see and know what God is like. By living close to Jesus, by breathing his life, we are transformed into his likeness.

Receive the Holy Spirit - receive the breath of living holiness. What we are about today is receiving a gift of life, a gift of a life which is we say eternal life, the only life that really matters, a life which at its heart is a love which will never let you down and will never let you go. What we are doing today is gathering you into the life of Jesus, praying upon you his life-giving Spirit, the Spirit who will write the law of the living God on your hearts, the pattern of loving which you see in Jesus. You will be the anointed ones, for that is what the word 'Christian' means - a follower of Christ, and Christ is the anointed one, the one filled with the life-giving Spirit of God.

When Jesus came to his disciples in the power of the Resurrection, and surprised them with joy, he gave them his life to be their life. But before he breathed on them he reminded them that if they were to share his life, they were to share his mission - *As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.* We call the church, apostolic, and our faith the apostolic faith, and the word apostle means one sent out, sent out with a message, sent out with a life to share, sent out to live the life of Jesus in the world, to live his humble service, to be counter-culture and subversive of the world of pride, and possessions; to live by a vision of values that find the presence of God in the poor and needy, in all that is beautiful and good, and knows that the secret of true life, of eternal life, is about giving and not getting, about serving love, in family and in society, about justice and righteousness as the things which belong truly to our peace.

Today, you say 'yes' to Jesus' calling, you receive the gift of his life, and you go out to live it, and go on living it, and to go on growing in that life, for the life you are given to share in is no less than the mind and heart of the love which created the universe in all its richness, the love of the God who loved you into being that you might share his life, and that through you his life might flow out into the world. You are to be saints, those alive with the life of God, *the Saviour in his people crowned.*

When I was ordained priest the preacher quoted these words. I do not know where they come from, but they are as powerful for you on the day of your confirmation, as they were for me on the day of my priesting.

*In the infinite longing through which I come to thee,
I know thee as the eternal love that breathes me in.....
To seize thee, I have only the touch of the soul,
And this love, this love, which binds me.*

Jesus breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit, receive the breath of living holiness, receive the shining, dancing, shimmering life of the living God. 'Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire.'
