

8th June, 2014

Reading: Acts 2: 1 - 21

Sermon: In Need of the Breath of God

I would like you, just now, to open your mouths and breath out. I wonder if you noticed anything. You may have heard the sound of your breath but I suspect you will have seen nothing and felt nothing.

I would like you now to cup your hands together and breath into them like we would do on a cold day. I can almost guarantee now that each of you would feel a warmth in your breath which you were unaware of before. You still won't have seen your breath but you will have feel the effect of your breath on your hands and if you wear glasses you may also have steamed up, evidence again that although you cannot see your breath, you can see the effect of it as indeed you could feel the effect.

Our breath feels gentle and warm but most of the day it goes unnoticed. However, if we were suddenly to find ourselves struggling for breath, we would be incredibly aware of its absence as indeed would our body. If that absence of breath escalated, the life we have would leave us. Our breath is essential to life in this world and it is also incredibly powerful.

What we feel in our hands as gentle and warm has the power to inflate our lungs day in and day out, so keeping us alive, but it also keeps the rest of our body functioning. When our oxygen levels drop, we're in trouble. Every breath we take is essential to life as we know it.

Following on from that, we could say that Pentecost is about our Christian oxygen levels or our faith oxygen levels. Pentecost is about the breath of God. Pentecost is about the life-giving, life-supporting breath which God gifts us so that we can fulfil our commission as a Church to go out into all the world with the news that Jesus is alive, that our sins are forgiven through Him and that God loves us and longs for us to love Him back.

Pentecost is about God gifting us the strength and the power to take that message to others no matter what and to take that message into a world that doesn't even know that God exists, let alone that Pentecost happened. The world at large had no idea of its need for the breath of God but then maybe as Christians we don't realise either how much we need it.

The world at large is happy to celebrate Christmas and Easter, even if the meaning of those seasons is lost, but Pentecost, the day which is regarded as the Church's birthday, would go unnoticed, not just by the world at large but by many Christians and that includes ministers. Pentecost is one of those days that we have been known to bypass for some reason.

But then, Pentecost is not about the gentle warmth that we associate with breath and with life. It is about a power that we almost fear to contemplate. It is about God really making His presence felt, as well as seen and heard.

Pentecost is something which can make us feel uncomfortable and yet the Holy Spirit is essential to the life of God's people. If we take away the breath of God, we die inside. We do not have the power to sustain our faith and our witness and our work without the presence of the Holy Spirit, without the presence of the breath of God.

As I was preparing this sermon I got to thinking about the ordination of ministers and about the baptism of babies.

When ministers are ordained and indeed inducted, there is the laying on of hands by the clergy on the one to be ordained or inducted to a charge. The Moderator in the midst of a prayer says to God:

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon this your servant.

When we pray we ask God for many things which we don't always get at the time of asking. Is it fair to assume therefore that God always gives us His blessing on demand?

I ask the question of us today because ministers can feel dead inside. Ministers can struggle with faith. Ministers can, at times, like everyone else, struggle to have any sense of God or to find any meaning in life. Maybe that is not what congregations want to hear but it is true. Does that mean that God's Holy Spirit is withheld?

I ask the question because in John's Gospel, the disciples already had faith before Jesus breathed on them and filled them with the Holy Spirit so faith itself is not dependent on the Holy Spirit. Faith comes first.

There are denominations where people will lay hands on individuals and pray that God's Spirit will fill them. There are Christians who see the coming of the Spirit into our lives as being an act which happens to us, as opposed to something which is just routine when we have faith.

Do we as a denomination need to be filled with the breath of God so that our faith lives and so that we have the power to take the message of hope and life to others, a message which we seem loathe to take to others?

Does this thought sit uncomfortably with us? Are we happier with the thought that if the minister simply asks God to fill us with His Spirit en masse that it will happen without us feeling any real impact? Does that sit better with us? Does the alternative, where the impact of God's breath is seen and felt, does that alternative seem too way out, too scary, too Pentecostal for mainstream Presbyterians?

The breath of God, the Spirit of God, is what will give life to our congregation and to our witness in our community. The breath of God, like our own breath, probably won't be seen as it was on the day of Pentecost as recorded in the Book of Acts, but its effects should be felt in our lives and should be seen by others.

The breath of God is our power house. Without the breath of God we will be like a lifeless balloon, flat and useless. With the breath of God within us, we will have the power to soar for God.

Pray that as individuals and as a Church we will be filled with God's Spirit. Pray that as individuals and as a Church, we will be filled with the breath of God because only then will we experience God's power in our lives and in the life of our Church and our community. Only then will we make the difference.