

breathe

the Spirit of life

In this moment of history we could not be more aware of how connected we are. An unknown virus spread from a largely unheard-of city to affect every human being on the planet. Pope Francis has been repeatedly reminding us that *everything is connected* (Laudato Si). I think we can say this realisation is now evident.

Perhaps nothing connects us more intimately than our breath. All life depends upon it and the exchange we have with our breathing green planet. With the average person taking an average of 20,000 breaths each day this subconscious activity can be easy to forget – until we can't do it anymore. It then becomes a powerful symbol of 'life'.

There are some powerful images in Scripture capturing this image of breath as the source of life. The Book of Genesis describes God breathing into the nostrils of human beings the 'breath of life' to make them 'living' beings (Gen 2:7). Breath is also used to express the presence of God, and for Elijah, he experienced God in the sound of a gentle breeze or 'gentle breath' (1 Kings 19:12 cf. Timothy Radcliffe, 'Alive in God', p.266). It is often an evocative image of the Spirit (the Hebrew word for 'spirit', *ruah* is also the word for breath) and it was at Pentecost that Jesus *breathed* on the disciples saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit". The Holy Spirit is the Spirit who gives life. It unites, connects and pervades all that is: ***The Spirit of life*** dwells in every human creature and calls us into a relationship with the Divine' (Laudato Si, 88). St Paul speaks of its power and proclaims that it is through Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit gives life and freedom: "For the law of the ***Spirit of life*** in Christ Jesus has set you free" (Rm 8:2).

Richard Rohr describes the profound intimacy of our breath and the holy. To breathe is to experience the Divine...the *ruah* of God: "A rabbi taught this prayer to me many years ago. The Jews did not speak God's name but breathed it with an open mouth and throat: inhale-Yah; exhale-weh. By our very breathing, we are speaking the name of God and participating in God's breath. This is our first and our last word as we enter and leave the world (Rohr, On Being, p.65)."

As we breathe-in, we feed and nourish our physical bodies and nurture our inner life. But we can't hold our breath. After being fuelled by the breath of the love of God we are compelled to breathe out, to give life to others and creation (Ezk 37:1-14). We are challenged to take up Pope Francis' invitation to become more consciously *guardians of creation, as well as our brothers and sisters in humanity*. Perhaps the moment has never been so urgent to take care of our planet and each other as we face together the uncertainty of a growing pandemic and its impact on the deterioration of life through social isolation, chronic loneliness, snowballing anxiety, economic uncertainty, and the loss of livelihood and life: "The virus of social injustice is as big a challenge as the medical response to COVID-19" (Pope Francis, August 19).

So in this year of the Plenary Council let us be conscious of our need to be attentive to the Spirit of life in discerning our way forward to be a source of fresh air as a Church for the world. May it be an opportunity for us to invite the Spirit of Jesus to enliven, energise, empower and unite us: The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! (Lk 4:18). Let us give thanks that we have been breathed to life God and share in Elihu's prayer of gratitude: ***"The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life."*** (Job 33:4)



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