

## Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020, Sunday after Easter: John 20:19-31 – ‘Breathe’

Breathing. It's the most basic, vital thing we do. The average human can survive 3 weeks without food, 3 days without water, but only 3 minutes without breathing. If you live to be 80, you'll take roughly 584 million breaths during the course of your life. In, out... in, out...

Most of the time we don't even think about it. But over the last two years, breathing has dominated our headlines. The dreadful covid-19 virus attacks our lungs more than any other organ. The first modern ventilator was invented in 1928, but in 2020 we suddenly found the word ventilator used more often in a few months than in the previous 90 years of its existence. And if you're anything like me, you'll have frequently held your breath whenever you passed someone on the street or in a shop that you thought presented a risk. I'm admitting that now, but I imagine most of you have done that – perhaps many of us still do.

**To breathe is to be human. To breathe is also divine.** When God creates humans, he *breathes*: 'the Lord God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul.' That's how the account of creation in Genesis chapter 2 puts it. Since God is the author of life, we humans are meant to carry, not just the breath of life, but the breath of God, the breath of the Creator.

I've said this before but the special name of God given to Moses (and therefore to God's people) might be meant to signify breath itself. We say Yahweh, but there are no vowels in Hebrew, so literally it is YHWH – ych-wch, ych-wch – **the sound of breath, of life itself**.

This is the most fundamental quality of the image of God that we carry – the breath of the Almighty within us. Yes, we have lots of other qualities too: a unique capacity to create and organise, to appreciate beauty, to love and think and dream and build. But it is only into Adam – i.e. us – that God breathes.

So when Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room on the evening of that glorious Easter Day, he does what seems a very strange thing to do, but in fact makes perfect sense. **He breathes on them.** After two years of the pandemic we find this idea off-putting, reckless even – I don't want any of you breathing on me at the moment, thank you. Think of the aerosols!

But **this is not some weird greeting: this is an act of re-creation.** As we've looked at through Lent, when Jesus rises from the dead, it is not just the greatest event in human history, it is the start of a new world order. The divine life of God is re-making the world, the kingdom is now at hand and from this point on, the trajectory of the world is towards the victory of God. It may not often feel like that at present, but little by little, soul by soul, God in Christ is establishing his kingdom on earth, as in heaven.

It's why John's gospel begins with a re-telling of the creation story, with Jesus at the centre: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the word was God.' Jesus is re-creating the world: and so, having begun his gospel like this, St John now reaches the climax of his gospel with the next and vital act in this re-creation narrative. **As God breathes in Adam in Genesis 2, so now Jesus breathes on his disciples in John 20.** 'Receive the Holy Spirit;' in other words the divine life of God come to you afresh, the first new creations in this new post-resurrection world.

And this sets the context for the rest of the encounter. With the divine life of Jesus imparted to us again, Jesus can now declare his peace over the disciples. Again, as we've looked at recently, peace is more than just the absence of conflict. It's derived from the Jewish word 'shalom', meaning complete wholeness and wellbeing. It is what Jesus promised his followers before his death, but can now declare over them after his resurrection. The peace of God can now guard our hearts and minds in Christ.

So Paul begins all but one of his letters: Grace and peace. God's grace leads to our peace – with God, with ourselves, with others.

Jesus can also speak about forgiveness. Whilst we might be disturbed at the idea that the disciples can declare who is forgiven and who isn't, it is important to stress that this is a delegated authority, it comes from Jesus, and we only have to ask ourselves the question: 'who doesn't Jesus forgive?' to get the answer as to how often the disciples were to withhold forgiveness.

Finally, Jesus' encounter with Thomas must also be put into the context of this first encounter on Easter Day. The risen Christ is fully able to impart his divine life from afar after the resurrection. When Jesus gently challenges Thomas, it is not really because Thomas questions the resurrection, it's Thomas' sense that he is somehow a second-class disciple because he wasn't in the room. Not true, Jesus says: blessed are those who don't see and believe. **My breath of divine life is now freely available to all who trust, whether I'm in the room or not.**

So today, give thanks that Jesus breathes his divine life *into each one of you*. Breathing is a physical necessity: but for all followers of Jesus, it is **a sign of eternity, of divine design**. Take a moment perhaps this day just to *breathe*: and as you do, imagine the breath of Christ filling you every time you breathe in. 'If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: behold, the old has gone, the new is now here!'

And filled with this divine life, let's, finally, hear Jesus' other word to his disciples. 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.' **We are to be life-bringers in this world.** I wouldn't advise you to literally breathe on people at the moment!: but how can you bring the breath of divine life where you are, and with the people that you know and love, this week? Amen.