



Life-Giving Breath of God

KATHLEEN RUSHTON discusses how the Pentecost gospel readings, John 16:4-15; 20:19-23, highlight the Holy Spirit as breathing life into the universe.

Engrained in me since childhood is the practice of making a sign of reverence when I pass a Catholic Church. Recently as I returned home from my parish Sunday Eucharist, I found myself acknowledging spontaneously the nearby Methodist and Anglican Churches. In a moment of grace, I realised that from their lecterns the same gospel reading of that Sunday of the Liturgical Year, give or take a few verses, was proclaimed as I had heard at Mass.

The three-year lectionary cycle is a shared taonga (treasure) for liturgical and personal prayer. Ecumenical work is essentially a spiritual task because it is participation in the prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). Learning to understand this prayer of Jesus is a spiritual process, a work and gift of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of ecumenism is spiritual ecumenism which, according to Walter Kasper and Rowan Williams, is about mission and prayer. Personal and communal prayer together, such as that during Prayer for Christian Unity Week (13-20 May), has its

origins in the loving communion of the Trinity. The Spirit can create a space for the exchange of gifts for mission.

Writing in the World Council of Churches publication, *Economy of Life*, Rogate Mshana and Athena Peralta stress: “The mission of the ecumenical movement today is about transforming the world into a place of justice and peace for all God’s creation . . . [in a] participatory search for alternatives that are centred on the people and the Earth.” Likewise, in *Laudato Si*,’ for Pope Francis: “we have to realise that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS par 49 Francis’s italics). We shall explore how on the Feast of Pentecost, gospel

Pentecost Sunday 20 May
Roman Lectionary – John 20:19-23 or John 16:12-15
Revised Common Lectionary – John 16:4-15

readings in both lectionaries are about the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God breathing life into the whole universe.

Long Unending Story

For the earliest Christian communities, the story of the Spirit began a very long time before Pentecost. To their listening to the Fourth Gospel they brought their rich traditions of the Spirit/Wind/Breath of God sweeping over the waters (Gen 1:2) and the Breath of God breathing life into the dust of the Earth so the Earth creature (*adam*) was formed from the Earth (*ha'adam*) – Earthling from the Earth, Groundling from the Ground (Gen 2:7, cf. Wis 15:11). The verb translated “breathed on” was used in the OT to refer directly to creation. The prophet Ezekiel is told to breathe on the dry bones so that the House of Israel may be re-created.

The Spirit was a way of speaking about the powerful presence of the God of Israel. The Spirit expresses the creative, prophetic and renewing presence of God to not only the people of Israel but to the wider world. The Greek word *pneuma* is used throughout the Scriptures as a translation of the Hebrew word *ruah* meaning “wind” or “breath” or “spirit”. These are beautiful images which describe the Spirit as an unseen wonder known by what it does, the effect it has and how it feels. The Spirit flows through all creation bringing life and love.

Human persons will stay alive only if they have the Divine Breath abiding in them (Gen 6:3). This applies to all creatures. God warns the flood will “destroy from under heaven all flesh in which there is the breath of life” (Gen 6:17) and “everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died” (Gen 7:22). The interconnected images of the Breath of God and the Word of God are linked explicitly in creation of the universe: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host [sun, moon and stars] by the breath of God’s mouth” (Ps 33:6).

For people today, the coming of the Spirit begins even before the biblical creation story. The Creator Spirit is the dynamic, energising presence who enabled the universe to come into being over 14 billion years ago and is creatively at work enabling the ongoing emergence of the universe and the evolution of all life on earth.

“Breathed on Them”

Against this background let us consider the Risen Jesus. He “breathed on” those present saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22). This is the Baptism with the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings. John testifies that Jesus is the one on whom he saw the Spirit abiding (Jn 1:32-33) and who gives God’s Spirit “without measure” (Jn 3:34).

Read in the light of the death-resurrection, the Spirit is the life-giver (Jn 6:63). Jesus was led by the Spirit in his preaching, healing, compassion for the marginalised, his passion and death. His death is a leave-taking in which he handed over the Spirit to the women and the beloved disciple at the cross (Jn 19:30). The Spirit is with Jesus at every stage of his life; forever interrelated and in communion with all life.

The Fourth Evangelist sees this same Spirit being given

to his friends as their Advocate or Paraclete (*parakletos*) (Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). This word means “one called alongside of”. This name evokes a rich, all-embracing picture of the Spirit as presence, teacher, comforter, guide, helper, friend, advocate, one who intercedes, consoler, spokesperson, witness, one who goes with, supports and stands beside another.



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New Pathways

Fruitfulness, beauty and co-operation are part of the long history of life on Earth as are predation, competition, death and extinction. In a finite, limited and bodily world, death is part of the way things are and central to the shape of biological life. In the face of death in the processes of the universe and all life, Christian theology bears witness to the death-resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus, God enters into the pain of the world, suffering with all creation, while at the same time the Spirit transforms death into redeeming love and radical new life.

While Jesus is the human face of God made flesh in our midst, the Spirit is revealed mysteriously as the Breath of God through all creation and through our hearts, minds and lives. More often than not the Spirit is described not in human terms (anthropomorphically) but in images taken from the natural world — as breath, wind, water, fire, oil and anointing. These images from nature remind us of “the otherness” of the Spirit. They resist human tendencies to domesticate the Spirit who is experienced in the depths of human relationships and in the wilderness and beauty of the natural world.

For Pope Francis: “The Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways” (LS par 238). What new pathway is the Spirit calling us to walk the talk of “hearing both cry of the earth and the cry of poor” in the ecumenical mission of the Church today?

Art by Ayva Tautalanoa, aged 10.



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