

Sermon for Evensong
Jesus College, Oxford
Sunday 29th May 2016, 5.45pm

“It was the breath we took when first we met. /Listen, It is here.”

When I think of the wind or the breath of God I immediately also think of many of the Cystic Fibrosis patients to whom I acted as a Chaplain in my time at the Royal Brompton hospital in South Kensington. In the CF world, whether we are living with CF ourselves or caring for someone with the condition, we are very conscious of our breath and our breathing. We are much more conscious of it than most of the population who simply take the easy flow of air in and out of the lungs very much for granted. One of the first things that hit me when I first came to work at the Royal Brompton was all the equipment that came with it: the oxygen masks and lines; the portable bottles of O₂; the drips and the canulars; the cartons of *Ensure* and the bags of sweets; the blood sugar test kits and the exercise bikes. So for in the CF community breathing is not something that is perceived as an uncomplicated process. We are more conscious of the fact that being able to breathe, with any degree of freedom, is the outcome of a complex range of factors - emotional, psychological and spiritual as well as physiological.

So we are very aware in the CF community of the breath. ‘God as breath of life’ may then seem an obvious image to pick for this sermon series here in chapel and my chaplaincy experience. We are probably, however, less conscious of the wind. So ‘God as the wind of life’ may be more difficult for us to relate to. But in many languages the words for wind and breath – which seem so different in English – are either the same or very closely related. In Arabic the word for both wind and breath is *ruh* and this is also the word that means ‘spirit.’ In Hebrew wind is *ruach*, which can also be translated as the ‘breath of God.’ So in Hebrew we see that wind and breath are very much connected with the spiritual aspects of human life, with the very heart of God and God’s creative activity. We have much the same connection in the Greek and Latin languages. In Greek the wind is *pneuma* in Latin *animus*, and these words are used for both the breath and for the soul. What these languages show us is the very close connection between wind and breath and soul. What they point to is that life itself - the breath, the spirit, the soul -that which makes us truly

and most fully human, is something that is in the air. Life is in the air around us and within us.

So the ancient languages tell us that wind is what gives us life. If we think through for a moment what the world would be like without wind we can see exactly why. The wind makes the earth habitable. If we did not have the wind the tropical parts of the planet would become too hot to sustain any form of life. That's because the hotter air would not be blown across the earth relieving these areas of their high temperatures. If we did not have wind the rest of the planet would freeze for exactly the same reason. The air from the tropics would not be shared across the globe. If we did not have wind water would be confined to the oceans and the globe would become desert. That's because there would be no force that could lift the moisture of the sea to transport it to another place. If we did not have wind there would be no erosion of rock and that would mean that there would no soil and no cultivation and no food to live on. Perhaps worst of all if we did not have wind we would all suffocate in our own waste products which would simply stay were we deposited them.

So it is the wind that makes the earth live. Winds are like the circularly nervous system of our planet: they share out energy, and information, warmth and awareness, they make something out of nothing, and they are a supreme creative force. Without the wind we would simply die and the planet would implode. The writer Lyall Watson beautifully describes this creative energy of the wind and our indebtedness to its existence: "We are the fruits of the wind – we have been seeded....by its craft." (Lyall 1984:8) So the wind is creative, it gives life. That's one of the reasons why it is used so often as a potent metaphor in how we talk about the spiritual dimension of human life. In many of the world's great faith traditions God is, in part, defined as such a creative life force.

But God is also like the winds in that the divine presence can only be *felt but not seen*. There are no photographs of the wind. Nor are there photographs of God. Artist's like John Constable and Joseph Turner depict the wind, but that can only be seen in the effect that it has on the landscape – trees swaying, water rippling, people being blown about. Similarly God can only be seen in the effects that God's presence has in our world and in our lives. We can't catch the wind in a net and we

certainly can't catch God in one either. The invisibility of both the wind and God - makes them a bit like love or hate or even politics: we can feel them as forces; we know that they shape our lives; but it's hard to talk about them since we only experience them indirectly. We live in a world, and in academic and indeed healthcare environments, which increasingly exist under what might be described as the 'totalitarianism of the eye.' Our lives, as well as our professional practice, are dominated by only one of the human senses – the sense of sight. We want everything to be seen. 'Show me' we say. Truth in our world is often reduced to what can be observed the so-called 'evidence based practice.'

But to meditate on the wind and the breath of God we are made aware that we are constituted by more than just one sense. We are not simply eyes, nor are we even simply bodies. Rather that which gives us life in all its fullness is the air that is around us and within us. That's why I chose the poetry we have heard today. Because these poems remind us of how breath is about life, about connection and about love.

In *Is it here* Harold Pinter connects breath and love. Its full title includes (*for A*) in brackets, that's because he wrote it as a love poem for his wife Antonia Fraser. The poem places him and Antonia in the same room. Sound interrupts them, and the poet wonders what it is. After running through a number of possibilities he concludes that "It was the breath we took when first we met. /Listen, It is here."

Whatever is a really emotionally powerful poem by the present poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. It's a poem that implies the separation of the poet from the woman that she loves. She then thinks about which bits of her lover she would wish to keep. First of all it's the hand so that she can hold it, or so it can touch her breasts or lips. Then it's the lips so that they might speak or smile or kiss again. Then it's the eyes so that they can see the poet and even cry. Then it's the face, the nose, and the ears which she wants to nibble with her tongue. Then finally it's the breath "I'll take your breath/ and ask that it comes and goes, comes and goes, forever,"

Breath is about life, connection, and love. That's the theme at the heart of these readings. It is also reflected in the two biblical passages that we have also heard.

Our first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is a text common to both Jews and Christians. It dates from a period of time when the people of Israel had lost their political independence and had been exiled to Babylon. This was not a happy time. But the text of Ezekiel holds out the hope of renewed life to the despondent people. The writer uses the image of a valley of dry bones to capture the situation of the people. But these dry bones will again be raised by the breath of God that will come from the four winds: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." Here the breath of God is depicted as being able to bring us back to life.

Our second biblical reading recounts the gospel writer John's account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the earliest followers of Jesus. Jesus breathes on them and then tells them to forgive others - to make remake connections that have been broken down by our all too frequent interpersonal falling outs. The Spirit comes in the narration of the book of Acts to the disciples in the "sound of rushing wind" and on tongues "as of fire." Again this is a story about the creative life-giving power of God. Here the Spirit comes on the followers of Jesus who are still so confused by his death, resurrection and ascension. But that breathes new life into them. And the chief gift of the Spirit was to enable them to communicate the good news to those in Jerusalem who spoke different languages. Again this is a story about a wind that connects human beings to God and to one another.

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This evening I celebrate the lives of those who have lived and continue to live with CF; as I remember those whom I have ministered to, and indeed have loved, who have died, I give thanks for the CF community its attention and care, its professionalism and research; and I hope and pray that we, gathered here, can also remember those things in our own lives which *we cannot see but can only feel*: the creative force of the wind of life itself; our connection with others who breath the same air that we do; the human and divine love that literally takes our breath away and makes us stop and listen. As we gather here this evening many of us may be aware of those whom we love but see no longer, but who we still very much feel- they are in the very air that is around us and within in us, and God is around and within us too. I pray that you can hear them say and God say to you:

“It was the breath we took when first we met. /Listen, It is here.” And that the breath that animated the life of Jesus and which he breathed into his own disciples may come and go in us: may it come and go in us forever.