

Sermon on Sunday 31 May 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Just Breathe

'Just breathe'; sometimes that's the best bit of advice anyone can give.

All air, I'm told, is recycled air. It's the same ancient air breathed from the beginning. So, with your next breath you could be inhaling stardust; dinosaur breath, the same air as Moses, Mussolini, Mohammed Ali. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor: 'Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby's first breath, or some dying person's last. We take it in, we use it to live, and when we breathe out it carries some of us with it into the next person, or tree, or blue-tailed skink'.

A breathtaking thought, don't you think?

'Just breathe'. In those moments when stress takes hold, or anger, panic, anxiety threatens, sometimes the very best thing to do is to consciously bring our attention to the breath; to breathe from our depths rather than the shallows. And this deceptively simple act of breathing in and out can restore balance, bring perspective; lead us into a calmer, more

accepting place.

So, for a moment, can I invite you to take a few deliberate breaths; 'just breathe'.

Notice the quality of each breath; the sensations as the air enters, then leaves, warmed by that brief moment within. Notice how your body lifts and falls. Each breath subtly different from the last; each one a gift; the gift of life, no less.

Seldom do we think twice about this breath that sustains us. Not until it's interrupted or becomes difficult do we begin to appreciate our body's life-giving rhythm.

The breath in so many traditions is the key to greater awareness or awakening because, through bringing our full attention to it, we come home to our own bodies and to the reality of the present moment; the only moment. It has power to heal and transform. It can be the simplest, actually, and most profound, prayer.

Perhaps you remember that our own scriptures remind us that we are each a fusion of the dirt of the earth and the breath of the divine. We are God-breathed earthlings. Even the ancient name of God (Yahweh), is the sound of breathing

- Yah Weh.

Someone once said that, 'Worship is when we give God his breath back' – in worship we return with gratitude, to its source, that loving, creative breath. Worship has this power to take us out of introspection, to refocus, reorientate; when we bring God to the centre of our loving attention; other less necessary things retreat; find their rightful place. And if breath can be worship, then that, actually, takes away the need for words, which too often just get in the way.

So, again, for a moment, 'just breathe'. Imagine that with each in-breath the life sustaining breath of God fills you, and then as you release that breath – imagine you are releasing your worship – your wonder, your gratitude, your love.

The American writer Maya Angelou once wrote that 'Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away'.

And today we celebrate that breathtaking moment not only in the history of the Church but in the history of our kind. On this day called Pentecost, we remember the arrival of the promised Spirit; who comes like fire and like rushing wind.

And this Spirit, this living breath of God, transforms everything – fear becomes courage; confusion, clarity; joy

becomes infectious and lives come to life.

Barbara Brown Taylor again says: 'When Jesus let go of his last breath – willingly, we believe, for love of us – that breath hovered in the air in front of him for a moment and then it was set loose on earth. It was such pungent breath – so full of passion, so full of life – that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength and in volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God wanted to make sure that Jesus' friends were the inheritors of Jesus' breath, and it worked'.

Yet another breathtaking thought - We are the inheritors of the breath of Christ; sent to breathe that same breath and life into others?

How? I guess, as always, it begins in prayer.

So again, 'Just breathe'.

As you breathe in, you are breathing in all that you need, and as you exhale, you are letting go of all that is unnecessary. Breathe in courage, let go of fear. Breathe in clarity, let go of confusion. Breathe in joy and compassion. Breathe in the breath of Christ.

And now, in your minds eye, allow the Spirit to sift your heart and surface the faces or names or situations, perhaps, which are in need of our prayers to sustain them in this moment. Imagine that you are breathing in their suffering and holding it within for but a second, then as you exhale, releasing that person or situation to the safekeeping and restoration of God.

Many profound and wonderful books have been written about the Holy Spirit, but, for me, this simple understanding of Spirit as breath is as helpful as it gets.

Apparently, 'to conspire' means to breath together. So, this morning we've been engaged in our own little conspiracy. And, actually, that should always be our purpose when we gather, as they did that first Pentecost – to conspire with the breath of God to become a conspiracy that can change a world, beginning with ourselves.

As lockdown restrictions begin to lift, many of us are talking about what the 'new normal' will look like. We should, however, I think, be praying for a New Better. So, how will we allow this breath of God to conspire within us to bring about a New Better; a Kingdom worth living in.

Here's a clue – 'just breathe'.

Breathe

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**Breathe in clarity,
let go of confusion**

**Breathe in joy
and compassion**

Breathe in the breath of Christ

