

***Don't Forget to Breathe* – Sermon for 8.00am, Pentecost Sunday, 28 May 2023,
Acts 2: 1-21 & John 20: 19-23 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

'Don't forget to breathe!' It sounds like a strange sort of instruction. I mean: why would you? It's particularly strange where I saw it: on various pieces of equipment at a gym I used to go to. Forget to breathe!? I'm gasping for every last breath! Then I realised how it can happen, for novices like myself. You strain so hard to lift weights or pull-down bars. Grimacing, you screw your face up and strain every sinew. It feels like you should close your mouth and hold your breath... And that means you fail. Your muscles won't respond because they require oxygen. Instead, you need a slow steady rhythm of deep breaths, in and out, to match the movements of the exercise you're doing.

As in the gym, so in life. We can be trying so hard in whatever it is we want to achieve, that we actually undermine our own efforts – working such long hours we fail to rest; rushing around so fast we go in circles; above all, relying on our own strength and not drawing on what God provides.

John's Gospel records that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples to equip them to do his work. Why do we find it so hard to breathe in the Spirit? The Spirit is the breath of God, the very breath that ordered and animated the whole creation. So how can we think there's not enough for us? How special, how clever, how strong must we think ourselves, if we imagine we can manage without? So, we must breathe: breathe in the Holy Spirit.

How do we do it? Luke records Jesus' instruction to his disciples to wait first in Jerusalem, which they did praying and worshipping together in the Temple. Doing so gave them time to breathe. Waiting and worshipping is how we take time to breathe in his Spirit.

When we read Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost, 50 days on from Easter, we can be mesmerised by the spectacle of all these people speaking fluently in languages they didn't know. If, like me, you'd love to speak foreign languages, it sounds so wonderful. I remember working so hard at school, learning endless vocab lists and verb forms: I learned to pass exams, but I couldn't actually speak the language. I know as I look back this was mainly a matter of confidence: I didn't believe my words would be correct, and I didn't want to risk making mistakes. The Holy Spirit's gift of tongues is not about teaching you how to order a coffee when you're on holiday in Spain. It is, obviously, about communicating the Gospel, and not only in foreign languages. Even when we're speaking English, many of us find ourselves all-too-often tongue-tied when we try to tell other people about God and what knowing God means to us. Again, I think confidence is the key, and trusting God the Holy Spirit is surely the answer. Pray that the breath of God will flow from our lungs and form words for us when alone we just stutter and burble. Again, we mustn't forget to breathe.

The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have been credited with 'rediscovering' the Holy Spirit for the whole church. (Although the Spirit had never gone away, there was a time when the third person of the Trinity rarely seemed to get a look in.) Modern Pentecostalism places great emphasis on speaking in tongues, something that can seem alienating to others. I was interested to read of its founder, William J Seymour, the one-eyed African American leader of Azusa Street mission in Los Angeles, the birthplace of the modern revival in the early 20th century. William J Seymour did see a place for speaking in tongues, certainly, but his emphasis was always on love, which he liked to spell out: L-O-V-E. He'd quote Jesus in John 14: 15-16 – 'If you love me, keep my commandments, and God the Father will give you the Holy Spirit.' Seymour said the true baptism in the Spirit is to be 'flooded' with the love of God, a love that empowers for service and inspires love for God's word.

Perfect love drives out all fear, including fears of failure, of making mistakes, of not having the right words, of not being seen to work hard enough. Perfect love relaxes us enough to trust God will provide. We learn about perfect love through Jesus. Jesus breathes the Spirit, that we might know that love within. Just don't forget to breathe.