

Sermon for Sunday 10 May – The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Acts 17.22-31; Psalm 66.7-18; 1 Peter 3.13-22; John 14.15-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Please do be seated.

I confess that while I was thinking about this sermon, my mind was a little bit blank on what to say for a while, until the hymn that we're going to sing a bit later came to mind: 'Breathe on me, Breath of God'. You can see the words on page 9 of your pewsheets, and you might like to look at it now.

So the hymn is a prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, asking that by receiving the Holy Spirit we might be purified and equipped to do the works of God. And the hymn kind of pretty much says everything that I want to say, so it's worth keeping and looking at it. The first verse reads, 'Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.'

So in our first reading today, we heard about St Paul, who was in Athens. And ancient classical Athens was a place of culture and law and ideas, a very civilised place. And it was a place where there were many temples to all sorts of different gods. We go on holiday to Athens today, we can still see the ruins of some of those temples there. All sorts of different philosophies and ideas were discussed, and the Areopagus that we read about this morning was a sort of a council of leading Athenians. It was like a high court in some respects, like a parliament, like a debating chamber, and they were the guardians of religious traditions and ideas.

And there were two schools of thought in the Areopagus. There were the Stoics, and the Stoics believed that human happiness could be achieved by living a good, moral, virtuous life, behaving ourselves, and just, you know, doing what's right in our own, our own sense. So they were one of the schools of thought. Then there was the Epicureans, and the Epicureans believed that as long as you didn't hurt anybody, the whole point of life was to be happy, to gain maximum pleasure for oneself.

So both believed in the idea of the classical gods of ancient Greece and Rome, but they didn't believe in an afterlife for human beings, nor did they believe that any of the gods that they had temples for were remotely interested in or involved in human affairs. So that all sounds a bit familiar to many ideas that we might hear today. We might hear people say, 'I don't need to go to church to be a good person.' That would be a Stoic position. We might hear somebody say,

'I'd love to win the lottery, and if I won the lottery, I'd see my family right, I'd give a bit to charity, and I'd spend the rest of my life on the beach.' That would be an Epicurean position. Both worldviews answerable only to oneself, with no moral obligation beyond oneself, no sort of spiritual hope or meaning, no expectation of any relationship with God.

So you might say not much has changed. St Paul, as a trained Jewish Pharisee, didn't see the world like that at all. He sees the world as Jesus taught us to see the world, that there's only one God and that Israel's God is intimately involved in human affairs because he made all that is and that he is the loving creator of all things, a God of love, and that in Jesus Christ that God entered fully into the human condition and involves himself with us. And in the death and the resurrection of Jesus, Israel's God has showed us the way to everlasting life. And this, St Paul says and believes, is the most important thing that we can hold on to. It's the whole meaning of life, and he carries this in his heart as he walks through and explores the cosmopolitan delights of ancient Athens.

And walking around Athens, Paul is challenged because on every street corner there was either a temple or an altar to all sorts of different gods and statues and all sorts of things. And people would burn incense and say prayers just to basically keep the gods happy so they didn't get cross with us. And Paul finds an altar to an unknown god. And this unknown god is a catch-all god, just in case we've missed anybody out. We better have an altar to all the gods that we haven't quite remembered, just in case we've missed anybody out. So from Paul's point of view, he would have seen that Athenian life was inward-looking, quite selfish, quite indulgent, and ultimately pointless. Whereas, he says to the people in the Areopagus, life lived in relationship with the one true God is not selfish, not pointless, not indulgent, but loving, purposeful, generous, communal, sacrificial, outward-focused.

So to back up what Paul's view would have been, Psalm 66 we sang this morning concluded with these words. 'They celebrated God who hears our prayers and who loves us', a God much more worthy of celebrating than the absent, distant, uncaring gods of pagan Athens. So have a look at the last words of the psalm we sang this morning, the very last verses. We sang: 'In truth God has heard me. He has heeded the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God who has not rejected my prayer nor withheld his loving mercy from me.' That's an intimate, caring, involved God who knows us. A very different idea to the ideas that Paul found in pagan Athens. And Paul goes on to explain that this God that the psalm celebrates is a God who gives life and breath to all living things. The breath of God being the Spirit of God, to receive the Spirit of God is to live with and for God. Life in all its fullness becomes possible because by his Spirit God is within us.

So in Paul's view, the Athenians are not alive at all, and he prays that they will come to an awareness of the one true God and be enlivened by his Spirit, his breath. So St Paul's prayer

for the Athenians is the same as the first verse that we're going to sing in the hymn later: 'Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life in you, that I may love what thou dost love and do what thou wouldst do.' Paul expresses it slightly differently in those beautiful words: 'In the life of the one true God we move and live and have our being.' Wonderful words, aren't they? 'In the life of the one true God, we move and live and have our being.'

The third verse of the hymn we're going to sing in a moment, 'Breathe on Me, Breath of God,' reads, 'Breathe on me, Breath of God, till I am wholly thine, until each part of me glows with the fire divine.' Looking at our Gospel reading today, Jesus is speaking to his disciples as they gather around the table at the end of the Last Supper. Jesus knows that he's about to be arrested, taken away, and crucified. So Jesus is telling his disciples that he's leaving them, and shortly they will no longer have the physical presence of Jesus with them to guide them, encourage them, and love them. But Jesus encourages his disciples to remain in his love and obey his commands.

And he promises to his disciples another advocate. An advocate is somebody who speaks for us, with us, the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, will dwell within them and with them. The gift of the Holy Spirit will enable the disciples to know that while Jesus has left them physically, he is still with them spiritually. And his Spirit will be the means of grace whereby we will be able to love as Jesus loves, whereby we will be able to keep the commandments that Jesus gave us.

In the book of Acts, we read that in the time between the Ascension of Jesus, which we're going to celebrate on Thursday, and the day of Pentecost, which we're going to celebrate in two weeks' time, the disciples devoted themselves to two weeks of prayer, waiting for the moment when Jesus would fulfil that promise and send the Holy Spirit. And you'll remember that they received the Holy Spirit like a mighty rushing wind, the empowering, enlivening breath of God. And this breath gives the disciples new gifts, new courage, and new life. 'Breathe on me, breath of God, till I am wholly thine, until each earthly part of me glows with the fire divine.' That's what the disciples prayed for, and that's what they received.

And the final verse of the hymn that we're going to sing later is, 'Breathe on me, breath of God, and so shall I never die, but live with you the perfect life of thine eternity.' Jesus says, 'On the day,' the day of Pentecost, 'you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.' So the gift of the Holy Spirit will establish an unbreakable bond between Jesus and his people, those who receive that gift of the Holy Spirit. So we believe that our life in this world is not pointless or empty, but a gift from God, and that in Jesus, God shares this earthly life, and by the gift of his Holy Spirit, we can share his eternal life. Ideas and promises that are very much

more meaningful and hopeful than the empty philosophies that Paul found in ancient Athens and which much of our modern world still shares.

So as I say, Ascension Day is on Thursday, and if anybody would like to come and join us, we're going up the tower at 8.30 in the morning to sing hymns on the tower top to celebrate Ascension Day. But now, in the invitation of Jesus, we begin the opportunity to pray for a fresh gift of the Holy Spirit for each one of us as individuals and for the church collectively.

A fresh enlivening of our own personal faith and a new equipping of us as the church that we can communicate and share the love of Christ Jesus in our community today. Saint Paul received that courage and those gifts to speak to a sceptical but interested audience in ancient Athens about the reality of the God that we believe in, the presence of God among us, which is good news for our own times as well. We've seen all that's been going on in local politics this week, haven't we, with elections and so on. And I saw an interview on the television with Ben Elton, the author and comedian, and he was saying that his understanding, looking at what's gone on this week, is that we live isolated lives with no sense of community. That our society has fractured and has been doing so for a long time, and polarised.

The gift of the Holy Spirit creates community and brings us back together, an agent of God's love for each one of us. Speaking about forgiveness, acceptance, renewal and meaning, as St Paul said, 'In him we move and live and have our being.' Last week the Gospel reading ended with Jesus saying to his disciples, 'If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it.' What he meant was that if you pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, you will receive it. And so that is what we pray for now and over the next 2 weeks until Pentecost— the gift of the Holy Spirit. And to help us to do that, I encourage you to take the pewsheets home and read the words carefully of the hymn 'Breathe on Me, Breath of God.' Read them as a prayer and make them your own. In Jesus' name, Amen.