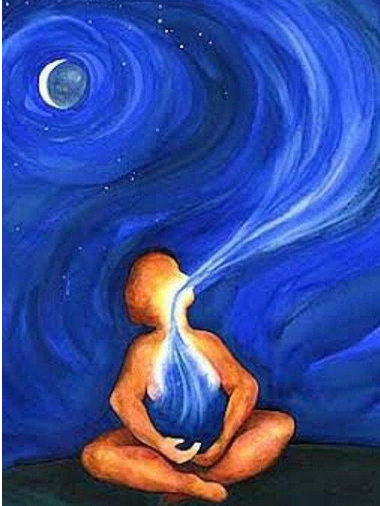


Breathing fire...



When I was in my late teens, I was the assistant Director of Music to a very large robed choir. Perfectly confident in leading a huge robed choir, personally I was still very shy. Every Friday night we would go to the pub, after choir practise. They were a confident bunch, and I was not. I would generally sit quietly, watching it all unfold around me. I didn't really feel part of the group, although I would have liked to be! One Friday, that changed.

Not a great drinker, most weeks I only had one drink. But that week then had another.... And I felt more confident, more able to join in the general laughter and conversation.... And then I had another. I had a fantastic time. All three drinks were bought for me by the Assistant Organist – a wise and gentle man, who blessed us with the music of his heart in more ways than we could count.

When it came to the fourth pint, I thought I ought to buy it myself. So off I went to the bar, but he came along with me – quietly, he informed me that he was worried I was being pressured by the environment and every pint he had bought me was non-alcoholic... just so I knew I had that option!

Oh!

Suddenly I was stone-cold sober.

And for a moment I was disappointed. I wasn't drunk after all!

But then... I started to laugh, and laugh. I hadn't needed to get drunk to be myself, and to join in with the joy of the gathering...

I ... guess I'd got drunk on the Spirit instead.

The confidence he had given me – albeit accidentally - was born of the love that cast out fear, restores relationship, and opens possibility. The only reason I'd been not joining in was fear and shyness. When that was cast away... I was free to be myself.

They're drunk! Said the people in our gospel today. No.... no, they had just learnt a little of how to be who they really were. And the joy of it was over-spilling.

Our own possibility, in God, is much bigger than we think; it is usually fear that holds us back. And the joy of seeing who we really are – or who each other really are – is the sheer delight that makes the angels swoon around God's throne.

He doesn't call us beloved for no reason.

That is why, I believe, the New Testament refers to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate. In court rooms, the Advocate is the one who speaks for justice against injustice and opens the way for healing and new life. The voices and judgements that we bring to ourselves and each other as humans, limit and damage creation. The Advocate – the Spirit - sets us free¹. Casting out fear with love, and opening doors to new possibility, and for us to grow into the people we were meant to be.

There are all sorts of Pentecosts, all through our lives. Sweet intimate moments of gentle renewal, and blowing gales of sudden insight and invigoration. Some steal gently in through the locked doors of fear like in our gospel reading today, meeting us in our scars and pains, and gently breathing healing and life. Some come hurling along into our uncertainty, in flame and wind, as the disciples experienced in our reading from Acts today – causing us to fire up with passion and hope and uncover new life and gifts and chapters.

You might remember the vision of Ezekiel – the valley of dry bones, which then gather flesh but 'have no breath in them', but then the Spirit breathes on them, and they come to life? Sometimes we just 'exist' – worn down by life and the attritions and depressions of the world, or simply afraid or not believing in ourselves enough to fully live. Jesus says *there is more than this .. let me breathe into you new life, new possibility*

¹ "The Accuser of our brethren has been thrown down¹" says the book of Revelation. Fear is the Accuser, and the Holy Spirit is the Advocate.

The message of Pentecost – breathing is enough. If we let God breathe in us.

We don't have to be amazing, we just have to be ourselves, in him.

... oh, and who we are? that is amazing 😊

In our two readings today we have two very contrasting Pentecost experiences. But both are about overcoming fear with love, and stepping into new life.

John's gospel, with its intimate and quiet gifting in the upper room, reminds of the midwife attending the birth of a child, gently breathing into its nostrils to help it breathe on its own. The reading from Acts more brings to mind a shepherd at the birth of a lamb, where one grabs it by its legs and whirls it round in a circle to force air into its lungs. Sometimes we need the gentle breath of the Spirit, and sometimes we need the violent, rushing wind.... And God, our mother, our Shepherd, knows all we need.

Jesus promises us he will always pour out his renewing Spirit upon us – and, like the disciples, not just for themselves – ourselves - but to share. He sends them – sends us - just as he was sent, to share love and life in the world.

There's the gift of communication in our Acts reading. Suddenly the disciples can communicate across all language barriers. They can speak in every tongue. It's a little foretaste. For now, the Church does indeed speak across all the world. The message is shared in thousands of tongues.

Together, we are called to be advocates for love and justice, hope and life.

And that may be in the thousand tongues and traditions of the global church. Or it may be in the thousand gestures of love and life that we share in prayer, in act, in word, in the way we are with each other and in the world. A love that speaks of hope and possibility, and steadfastness, compassion, grace, and peace.

A flame is given, a beacon of hope, to pass on to those we meet along the way.

S. Catherine of Siena knew this.

"Be who God meant you to be", she said,
"and you will set the world on fire".

Against the fears of our hearts, and the fears of the world, we are entrusted with flame.

I shall leave you with an image from the Lord of The Rings... the great good wizard Gandalf standing on a bridge in the deep dark mines of Moria. The Balrog – the most terrifying monster of the deep - is attempting to stop the small company of fellowship from its mission to bring healing to the world. Gandalf simply turns and faces it full on and declares –

'You cannot pass,..... I am a servant of the Secret Fire... The dark fire will not avail you... Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.'

Tolkien himself revealed that the secret fire was a symbol of the Holy Spirit

We are all servants of the secret Fire. And together, we can cast out fear, and defeat the shapeless monsters of the deep – monsters that represent all the limitations and oppressions of the world - so that all people can grow to be what they were meant in God to be. Released from fear, and free to shine.

Jesus says....

"I am come to cast fire on the earth; and how I wish that it were already kindled!"²

Our own possibility, in God, is much bigger than we think ... and every breath we take is breathed first by God....

Breathing is enough, if we breathe in him.

And sometimes... we might just find ourselves drunk on the Spirit, breathing fire...

"Be who God meant you to be", said Catherine of Siena,
"and you will set the world on fire".

² Luke 12: 49