Pentecost Sunday, 2020

University Sermon

Christ Church, Oxford

The Christian tradition uses a number of images to represent the Holy Spirit: dove, wind, flame. All these images have something in common: movement. The Spirit is leading, directing, literally inspiring – filling with breath and life. These vibrant images lie behind the Nicene Creed’s statement concerning the Holy Spirit who is ‘the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.’ The Holy Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life. Life is breathing and movement. We think of the Spirit brooding over the face of the waters in the creation narrative, the spirit of life breathed into the nostrils of Adam, the breath of life extinguished in the great flood, the breath of life which allows speech, praise and prophesy in the psalms and throughout the Old Testament. St. John records the risen Christ breathing the Holy Spirit over the disciples. St. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, recounts the first Pentecost when the Spirit descended in rushing wind and tongues of fire upon the apostles, enabling speech in various languages. The breath of speech in different languages was to allow the disciples to proclaim to the whole world the promise of new life in Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to inspire one another with the life of Christ.

The Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, gathers the first disciples around the risen Christ to share a new life. This new life heals all that fractures human community and prevents the sharing of life – the sin of violence, injustice, greed, pride, envy, self-centredness. The Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, gathers the disciples around Christ to inspire them – fill them with the breath and life of God – and lead
them into the truth that will set them free. St. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit comes with gifts for life – gifts of wisdom, faith, prophesy and healing. The Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes with sighs – with breathing – too deep for words, writes St. Paul. The sharing of the life of the risen Christ in and through the inspiration, the in-breathing, of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, is the heart of the Church.

The establishment of Israel and the gathering of the Church by the Holy Spirit are calls to share human life and to share the life of God. Life in its fullness is life that is shared as a gift of God. Jesus knew very well that the community that would be gathered around him to share his life would be fragile and prone to division, so he prayed for the unity of the Church – the wholeness of its life. Such is the fragility of our common life, such are the myriad threats to that life, that only the grace of the Holy Spirit – the gracious breath of the Spirit interceding – can make our life one.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the gathering of the Church under the inspiring of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, bore fruit in different forms of community and common life. Aside from its local churches and dioceses, Christianity deeply influenced common life, from families to city states. It gave rise to monastic communities which in turn birthed the schools which were communities gathered to share the life of the mind. I am speaking to you now from a building which was once part of the Benedictine school of Durham Priory, now Durham Cathedral, which founded Durham University in 1832. Those medieval monastic schools, including Oxford, were the predecessors of the Renaissance schools and, eventually, modern research universities. Universities are precisely communities gathered, like the Church, for the sharing of life. They share the life of the mind, discerning and speaking of truth, beauty and goodness in all the languages of the world. Of course, the life of the mind cannot be shared in isolation from the
remainder of human life, so university communities share the full breadth of human life as we study, eat, create, play, and pray together. From the library to the lecture hall, the dining hall to the sports field, the lab to the theatre, life is shared; we inspire one another. The breath and speech of life flow through us in research and teaching rooted in a wider common life. The breath and speech of the life of learning have their historical and theological source in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, the Spirit of truth who guides us into all truth.

I mentioned a moment ago that Jesus understood the fragility of the community of the Church that would be gathered around him. He prayed for its integrity and wholeness. The coronavirus pandemic has, of course, revealed again the fragility of our common life. It has shattered communities ordinarily gathered for the sharing of life. The doors of churches and universities have been closed for some weeks. We have been confined to our homes and distanced from one another. We can attempt to recreate the common life of the church and the university through technology such as we’re now using, but we know this is a mere mimicking of common life. It only makes clearer the truth that life in its fullness is shared, when we are fully present to one another and literally breathe the same air. This is a brutal lesson concerning the value of the common life of the university and its colleges, where we are fully present to one another to discern truth, beauty and goodness, to speak in all the languages of the world for the inspiring of human life.

The deep tragedy of this virus is that it provokes a respiratory illness – an illness which compromises breathing. It threatens health and, for far too many, has taken the breath of life. It threatens the common life – the breathing, as it were – of communities of so many kinds, including universities and churches. As we learn to live with coronavirus, whatever the future may hold with or without vaccines or cures, we can learn to discern the way in which life returns as a gift of God, breathed
again into human communities for the sharing of life. The gathering again of university communities to share the life of the mind and the life of learning will be a serious challenge over the coming months, but it is a challenge that must be faced. Those communities are so vital not only for students and academics, but for the inspiring of human lives across the world. The gathering again of churches will be no less challenging. We pray for the renewed gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, breathed by the risen Christ, now to heal the wounds of this pandemic and gather human communities to share again the life of God in all its fullness, and the truth which sets us free.

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