



Encouraging Breath of the Spirit

Kathleen Rushton *discusses the many ways the Spirit's activity is imaged in John's Gospel.*

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES some of the extensive and unique ways the Spirit is presented in the Fourth Gospel from the Farewell Discourse (Jn 14-16) to when Jesus appears to his disciples (Jn 20:19-23).

“Wind”/“Breath”/“Spirit”

The story of the Spirit began long before Pentecost. The earliest Christians brought to their listening of John's Gospel their rich tradition of the Spirit/Wind/Breath of God

which was a way of speaking about the powerful presence of the God. The Greek word *pneuma* is used to translate the Hebrew *ruah* meaning “wind” or “breath” or “spirit.”

These images describe the Spirit as an unseen wonder known by what it does, the effect it has and how it is experienced. The Spirit expresses the creative, prophetic and renewing presence of God by flowing through all creation bringing life and love.

For people today, the coming

of the Spirit, too, begins before the biblical creation story. The Creator Spirit is the dynamic, energising presence who enabled the universe to come into being some 14 billion years ago and is creatively at work enabling the ongoing emergence of the universe and the evolution of all life in Earth.

“Breathed on Them”

Jesus “breathed on” those present saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit”

(Jn 20:22). This recalls the Spirit sweeping over the waters (Gen 1:2) and the Breath of God breathing life into the dust of the earth to create the earth creature (*adam*) from the earth (*adamah*) – earthling from the earth, groundling from the ground (Gen 2:7; Wis 15:11).

The verb “breathed on”, found only here in the New Testament, is used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to creation. Ezekiel is told to breathe on the dry bones so that the people might be recreated (Ez 37:1-28).

Human persons will stay alive only if they have the Divine Breath abiding in them (Gen 6:3). This applies to all creatures. God warns that the flood would “destroy from under heaven all flesh in which there is the breath of life” (Gen 6:17).

God Creating with Two Hands

The interconnected images of the Breath of God and the Word of God are linked in the creation of the universe: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host [the sun, moon and stars] by the breath of God’s mouth” (Ps 33:6). The Breath of God always accompanies the Word. Early Father of the church Irenaeus tells us of “God creating with two hands, that of the Word and that of the Spirit.”

The Spirit is with Jesus, the Word, at every stage of his life. John the Baptist speaks about the outpouring of the Spirit, testifying that Jesus is the one on whom he sees the Spirit abiding (Jn 1:32–33) and who gives God’s Spirit “without measure” (Jn 3:34).

Understood in the light of the death-resurrection, the Spirit is life-giver (Jn 6:63). Jesus is led by the Spirit in his preaching, healing, compassion for the marginalised, in his passion and death. His death is a leave-taking and he hands over the Spirit to the women and the Beloved Disciple at the cross (Jn 19:30 – see *Tui Motu* March pp 24-25) and to re-create the disciples. Jesus and the Spirit are interrelated and in communion with all life. This is the baptism with the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings and into which all the baptised are immersed.

Four Aspects of Spirit

The Evangelist offers four unique aspects of the Spirit.

First, Jesus gives the Spirit to his friends as their Paraclete (*parakletos* Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). *Parakletos* means “one called alongside of.” Under this title many meanings come together in a rich, all-embracing picture of the Spirit as presence, teacher, comforter, guide, helper, friend, advocate, one who intercedes, consoler, spokesperson, witness, one who goes with, supports and stands beside another. The Spirit is presented as a person (Jn 14:15–16; 15:26–27; 16:14–15).

Second, the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Third, the Spirit is the Advocate almost in a legal sense of “counsel for the defence” (Jn 15:26–27; 16:8–15).

Fourth, the Spirit has a special resemblance to Jesus. Both come into the world (Jn 5:43; 16:28; 18:37; 3:16–17). They share titles: Jesus is the Truth (Jn 14:6); the Holy One of God (Jn 6:69) and the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17); the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26; 20:22). The relationship of Jesus and Spirit with disciples is expressed in similar ways. Both: abide/remain (Jn 14:10, 17; 15:4–10); guide/teach (Jn 6:59; 7:14; 8:20; 14:26; 16:13); are unseen/unknown (Jn 16:16, 3; 7:28–29; 14:7). The Spirit’s teaching is about/glorifies Jesus while Jesus glorifies God (Jn 8:28; 12:16, 23, 27–28; 14:13; 17:4).

Re-announcing

In his farewell discourse, Jesus expresses deep concern for his disciples now and future generations. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains with us to enable us to complete the works of God. He repeats the word “declare” (NRSV) or “tell” (JB) three

times in John 16:13–15. This verb has the sense of re-announcing what has been heard previously – mysteries already communicated are described. Jesus is encouraging the disciples to face the hard times ahead by seeking deeper meaning in what has already happened. Raymond Brown explains: “The best Christian preparation is not an exact knowledge of the future but a deep understanding of what Jesus means for one’s own time.”

Jesus knew the hearts of those earliest disciples were troubled; he knows our hearts are troubled (Jn 14:1, 27). He says: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (Jn 16:12). When we can bear it, the Spirit will re-announce and re-proclaim, what has been received from Jesus who was sent by God (Jn 16:14).

As Raymond Brown says: “The one whom John calls ‘another Paraclete’ is really another Jesus. Since the Paraclete can only come when Jesus departs, the Paraclete is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.”

The Spirit is a bridge between the historical life of Jesus and the post-Easter life of the church in this world God so loves (Jn 3:16). The role of the Spirit is to enlighten our minds and hearts to the truth, and to that deep inner knowing that accompanies a feeling of peace.

Pentecost offers us time to reflect about ways the Spirit is re-announcing the significance of the truth of God already communicated in what Jesus has said and done to our generation. We might recall a time when we experienced the Spirit as “the gentle whisper of a breath” or as “the wind blowing where it chooses” (Jn 3:8). ☞

Readings for Pentecost Sunday, 19 May: John 20:19–23 or Jn 14:14–16; or Jn 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

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