

Sermon Breathing, Being Sent, Repentance JT  
Easter 2 27.04.14 HURC John 20:19-31

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. His resurrection changes everything. Nothing will ever be the same, because the risen Jesus is the appearance of the new creation and new age and new order that God is bringing into being. This was the dawning realisation of the disciples to whom Jesus first appeared. Those disciples were able to see the risen Jesus with their own eyes. Their being able to see Jesus was able to overcome even the doubt of Thomas. But such physical seeing would not be available to all those who would come after the first disciples. They and we are those who are challenged to find that blessed state of believing without seeing (20:29). But in a materialist age, when seeing and touching is taken to be the test of truth, we who claim to trust in the spiritual presence of the risen Christ are regarded as curiosities. Yet the Christian experience testifies that when we open ourselves to the spiritual presence of Christ—when we stop striving with self and start trusting in God—we find a peace “such as the world cannot give” (14:27). This gift of peace was the risen Jesus’s original gift:

Jesus said to them . . . ‘Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.’ Then he breathed on them, saying ‘Receive the Holy Spirit! (19:21-22)

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is described forty times as the one who is sent by God the Father. Jesus is sent as an expression of God’s love “not to condemn the world but to save it” (3:16-17). Jesus is sent to reveal the truth about those estranged from God; those who claim to see but are actually blind (9:39-41). Jesus is sent to show people the way to trust God and

thereby find eternal life. These are some of the ways in which God sends Jesus. In the story we have just heard, Jesus sends the disciples to continue and to complete his mission. The disciples then, and we who claim to be Jesus’s followers today, are sent as Jesus was sent. We are sent in love not to condemn but to point people to Jesus who can save. We are sent to uncover the truth of people’s estrangement from God. We are sent to witness to that new quality of life we have found by trusting God through Jesus.

All of us, including Ministers of the gospel, regard ourselves as inadequate in the face of such a commission. And so we should: for to carry out such a commission is far beyond our human capabilities. Calvin recognised this:

. . . to bear the [message] of eternal salvation, to set up God’s kingdom on earth and to lift [people] up to heaven is something far above human capacity. It is not surprising therefore that no [person] is found fit unless he [or she] be inspired by the Holy Spirit. For nobody can speak one word about Christ unless the Spirit governs his [or her] tongue . . .

*The Gospel according to St John, 11-21, p. 204*

Calvin, the ‘Theologian of the Spirit’, recognises that without the enabling and empowering of the Holy Spirit we can do nothing at all to share Christ with others. So the John the Evangelist represents the risen Jesus as supplying what the first disciples lacked. But the manner in which he represents the giving of the Spirit is found only in this Gospel.

Jesus breathed on them saying ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

In depicting the giving of the Spirit to the disciples by Jesus breathing on them, John is very likely reaching back to the

second creation story in Genesis, where after the Lord God forms man from the dust of the earth, he breathes into his nostrils the 'breath of life' and man becomes a 'living creature' (Gen 2:7). And John is also very likely referencing Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to the bones, and when he does so the bones start to fit together, sinews, flesh and skin cover them. Then Ezekiel is instructed to prophesy to the Wind or Breath. He does so and all of a sudden God's breath enters them and they come to life and rise to their feet, a mighty company (Ez. 37:1-10).

In a similar way, the disciples need the inspiration and power of the Spirit if they are to be sent out as Jesus was sent. They need the energy and the guidance of the Spirit if they are to share the good news that the risen Jesus gives access to a new quality of life. Jesus exhales the gift of the Spirit; and the implication is that the disciples inhale his gift of the Spirit. But having inhaled, the disciples must, in turn, exhale the Spirit's gift to others. The physical action of breathing consists in a continuous alternation of inhaling and exhaling. It is no accident that John employs this visual metaphor of breathing. For just as we have to breathe in and breathe out in order to live physically; so we also have to take in and give out the Spirit's energy in order to live spiritually. We need to become porous to the Spirit if we are to let Christ inspire us and indwell us, especially if we are to share Christ with others.

Jesus gives a further commission to the disciples on whom he has just breathed the Holy Spirit:

If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.  
(20:23)

What is not mentioned explicitly here, but what is clearly implied, is *repentance*. Repentance is a turning away from what is wrong and resolving to do what is right. Repentance is the recognition of one's own sin and a reaching out to God for forgiveness. Properly speaking, forgiveness is effective only when it is accompanied by repentance. Therefore it is the response, or non-response, of repentance that indicates whether a person is forgiven or unforgiven.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, onetime resident of Highgate, argued that 'the real miracle of the gospel is not forgiveness, but repentance.' And what I think Coleridge meant is that we know that the gospel is effective when those who respond it are inspired to *change* their attitudes and their lives. When the criminal goes straight: that is repentance. When the liar tells the truth: that is repentance. Whenever we say 'sorry' for something we have done wrong and mean it, and resolve to repair the damage we have done: that is repentance. I believe that whenever anyone repents, it is because they have knowingly or unknowingly opened themselves to the grace of God that comes through Christ and in the Spirit.

Some of you may have heard the report of the Iranian mother, Alinejad, who was burning with hurt and vengeance against the murderer of her son who was killed in a street brawl. Shortly before the murderer was due to be executed by hanging, Alinejad had a dream in which her dead son appeared and asked her not to take revenge. But she was still so angry that she ignored the dream. In Iran the legal guardian of a murder victim has the power to overturn a perpetrator's death penalty. Alinejad's husband had assigned to her legal guardianship. Then came the day of the execution. The murderer, a man called Balal, was standing on a chair with a noose around his neck. Alinejad, as legal guardian of the

deceased, also had the right remove the chair on which the murderer was standing in order to facilitate his execution. But then, all of a sudden, instead of pushing away the chair she slapped Balal across the face.

‘After that,’ she said, ‘I felt as if rage vanished within my heart. I felt as if the blood in my veins began to flow again. I burst into tears and called my husband and asked him to come up and remove the noose.’

The rope was unhooked and Balal was declared pardoned. Alinejad is reported to have said,

‘All these years, I felt like a moving dead body. But now, I feel very calm, I feel I’m at peace. I feel that vengeance has left my heart.’

*The Guardian, 26.04.14*

If repentance is a change of heart and mind, then Alinejad surely demonstrated it. It was all the more remarkable in that there was no mention of any contrition on the part of Balal before his pardon. Yet Balal would be like a stone if his reprieve has failed to change his life as well. That this story was reported in the first place suggests that this was an exceptional and unusual experience, and that most people do not forgive but pursue vengeance to the bitter end.

We show that we are open to Jesus’s sending Spirit when we who have repented and been forgiven of our sins by God are sent out to witness to others of how, with God’s help, we are attempting to put into practice repentance and forgiveness

Thanks be to God.  
Amen

