

Breathe in, breathe out

Holy Thursday, Year B (1 April 2021), Lucy Chamberlain

I'd like to take a moment this evening to reflect on something that we do every day of our lives. Something that usually happens so naturally, so regularly and unobtrusively, that most of the time, we barely even notice or think about it. On average, a person will do it about 673 million times in their lifetime, and it will be just about the last thing we do before we die. In fact, you're doing it right now. I am, of course, talking not about checking your phone but about breathing. Taking a breath, or rather taking lots of breaths, is fundamental to survival; it's fundamental to life.

Importantly, when we speak about taking a breath, we don't mean just breathing *in*, or just breathing *out*. I can't say to myself, 'Today I only feel like inhaling, so I won't do any exhaling.' You can't have one without the other. Breathing is a cycle—one that must be repeated, over and over again, in order for our bodies to function and stay alive. My breath oxygenates my blood and keeps all the other processes in my body going. Like my heartbeat, it establishes an underlying rhythm or tempo for life.

Scripture tells us that the church is also a body, and not just any body; we are the body of Christ. Not an inanimate corpse but a living, moving, complex organism, comprising many different parts and animated by the very breath of God, the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew word for Spirit, *ruach*, is also, significantly, the word for breath. The flow of this breath is both inward and outward. It gathers us in, and it sends us out.

As a church, we sometimes get bogged down in debates about where our focus should be. Should we be an outward-facing, missionary community, committed to evangelisation and to serving those most in need? Or are we a close-knit community of worshippers and seekers, accompanying each other on an inward spiritual journey to the heart of our faith, through prayer, contemplation, liturgy and the sacraments. But these are false distinctions. You cannot have one without the other, any more than you can have the inward breath without the outward breath, or vice versa. Each makes the other possible.

Our scripture readings this evening contain some very important insights into what it means to be a living, breathing church. As Jesus and his disciples gather together in the upper room, this one last time before his death, he sets in motion a rhythm, a perpetual cycle, that has sustained and animated the church through the centuries, right to this very moment. Paul's account of this event in our epistle reading is, of course, the basis of the words of institution that we hear every Sunday as we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist—words that are so familiar that we perhaps fail to pay proper attention to them—just like we fail to notice our own breath. And yet the event that these words describe is as essential to the life of the church as our breath is to our own survival.

On that night, as they gather together at the table, Jesus draws his friends into an extraordinary moment of intimacy and tenderness, and knowing that he is about to leave them, he gives them this precious gift—the gift of himself in the Eucharist—to sustain and nourish them. The disciples have no idea what's in store for them, but Jesus does. In the weeks and months and years ahead, they

will be called to take the Good News of Christ's life, death and resurrection to the ends of the earth, but they will also be called to take up their own crosses.

It is no easy path we set out on when we choose to walk in the way of Jesus, and it's certainly not a path we are equipped to tread on our own, relying solely on our own skills or resources. When we come to the table, when we come to the Eucharist, we come acknowledging our own hunger and thirst; our own need to be nourished and sustained. The table is essentially a place of humility and vulnerability; a place where our deep needs are met. Where we acknowledge that we are not super-human, but mere mortals, in need not just of physical but of spiritual sustenance—the kind of sustenance we can only receive in the presence of Christ. Our attempts to live out the mission of the church are futile, even harmful, unless they come from this place of deep humility and trust in the one who sends us.

Jesus models for us this kind of humility in our gospel passage. Knowing that Judas is about to betray him, and that his other followers will abandon and deny him, Jesus nevertheless responds to them not with anger or bitterness, and not by asserting his own authority or drawing attention to his achievements, but by tenderly and unassumingly washing their feet. Peter's reaction to this unexpected move is revealing. As the Australian Catholic writer Shane Dwyer observes, 'In an apparent rush of humility, Peter resists having Jesus wash his feet. The exchange is a reminder of how difficult it is to accept that the life Christ offers us is primarily something he does in, to and for us. We tend to default back to thinking we are in charge. This encounter reminds us that our role is largely to receive and to respond to what God is doing and not the other way around.'

It is no accident, then, that Jesus' parting gift to us is a meal. Just as we need to breathe, we need to eat and drink. Our human hunger and thirst keep bringing us back to the table, to the place of relationship and thanksgiving, where we are fed, again and again. The deep communion with Christ and each other that we experience in this sacrament not only sustains our mission but is its ultimate purpose. Like our breath, our movement into and out of the Eucharist forms the underlying rhythm of our life as the church. Just as the Passover meal became for the Israelites a means of recalling and reexperiencing, year in and year out, the saving action of God in their lives, the Eucharist establishes for us a pattern or rhythm whereby we are continually called back into Jesus' presence, entering into the mystery of his self-giving, sacrificial love, a love that finds its climax on the cross: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'

For the church, then, the Eucharist is like the deepest point of our breath—that still, holy moment where we hold the breath, the *ruach* of God, deep within our lungs, experiencing the profound and transforming presence of Christ with us, before we are carried back out into the world that he calls us to love and serve.

Breathe in, breathe out. Amen.