# Breath of God: the Gift of Pentecost

## Bible Texts

### Jesus Appears to His Disciples

‘On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”’ **(John 20:19-23)**

### The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost

‘When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”’ **(Acts 2:1-12)**

## Summary

John’s account of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit is quieter and more discreet than the Pentecost of Acts. This perspective invites us to see the Holy Spirit not as a forceful wind, but as the gentle breath of God. How does this understanding transform our perception of the Spirit’s presence within us? As we explore Pentecost, we recognise God as the ultimate gift-giver, offering us the Holy Spirit. Our role is to receive this gift with gratitude, allowing him to infuse our being like breath, giving us life and embodying what it means to truly live.

## Preaching Goals

* To recognise God as the perfect gift-giver
* To receive his gift of the Holy Spirit, who infuses our lives like breath
* To make our relationship with God as easy as breathing

## 1. Reading John 20:19-23

* Emphasise it being the first day of the week in John’s account, which links back to the first day of creation. Here, the giving of the Holy Spirit is linked to the start of the new creation.
* Unpack how the setting is the same as Pentecost – in a locked room with the disciples scared of the Jewish authorities.
* Jesus gives them peace twice. Explain how this is not just a greeting but a link between the gift of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of *Shalom* – of wholeness, rest and peacefulness.
* Explore how the Spirit is ‘gifted’ with the commission to continue Christ’s mission – as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends the disciples. What for? To forgive sins.

## 2. Opening

* When we think about Pentecost, we are used to the story from **Acts 2;** but there is another account of the disciples receiving the Spirit in **John 20.**
* The biggest difference is that at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit blows like a violent wind through the room and Jesus is not bodily present. In John’s Gospel, it is Jesus who gives the Holy Spirit and does so by breathing over the disciples, not by blasting them with a rushing wind.
* Perhaps our understanding of the Holy Spirit living in us might change if we focused on Jesus breathing on us, rather than expecting a violent wind.

## 3. Context

* Throughout the Bible, we see the image of God’s breath being used for the Spirit of God, and for the way that God brings life. God speaks the universe into creation, and then in **Genesis 2** breathes into the dust to turn it into a human being.
* In biblical Greek, the word for ‘spirit’ more closely corresponds to ‘wind’. In biblical Hebrew, it is the word for ‘breath’, something which brings life. By having Jesus breathe the Holy Spirit over the disciples, John is using a Jewish metaphor to give meaning to the event.
* The underlying themes are peace and commissioning. The Holy Spirit is given through a breath, not a violent wind. Jesus gives peace, and the disciples are commissioned to offer forgiveness.

## 4. Development

* What does it mean for us to think of the Holy Spirit living in us like breath rather than wind? Our breathing is something we don’t always think about, but without it we would not be able to live.
* Our relationship with God is something that we should be able to trust in and relax into until it becomes part of who we are. Just as breathing is something we don’t have to think about, what would it be like if our relationship with God got to the point where it was as natural and reflexive as breathing?
* For John, the giving of the Holy Spirit is linked to the commission for the disciples to share the gift of Christ with others. Here we see another parallel. **John 20** brings together what we see in **Matthew 28** and **Acts 2.**

## 5. Challenge

* Is our relationship with Jesus one of resting in his peace? What do we need to do to bring ourselves back into that peace?
* Is our relationship with the Holy Spirit as easy as breathing? Do we need to go back and rest a while and just ‘breathe in’ this free gift?
* Are we living out our vocation to forgive other people as Christ has forgiven us? What do we need to do to live up to that calling?
* How might we share the gift of Christ with others?

## Reflection

### Breathe In

‘O still, small voice of calm.’

Pentecost is frequently characterised by loud songs, upbeat preaching, throwing birthday parties for the Church, or emphasising the most visible and demonstrative gifts of the Holy Spirit. When we think of Pentecost, we often think of the fiery tongues and the roaring wind and the masses turning to Christ. We sing about sending the fire again and we clap and make wonderful and joyous noises to the Lord.

All of these things are right. It is right to worship and praise God. It is right to celebrate the amazing events of Pentecost and the wonders that the Holy Spirit can accomplish in our lives. But we sometimes miss an aspect of the Spirit which is equally important and equally transformational.

We sometimes miss the breath of God.

God creates human life by breathing into the dust of the Earth. God breathes the Holy Spirit into us to give us fresh life. Sometimes Pentecost, the indwelling of the Spirit in us, does not look like a rushing wind. Sometimes, it is more like a breath. Gentle, quiet, unobtrusive. Sometimes, the work of God in our lives is like our own breathing.

How often do you think about breathing? For most people, most of the time, breathing is just something you get on with. Until you become aware of it. Then it is very difficult to stop being aware of it! Sometimes, the Holy Spirit can be like that when he is at work in our lives.

Often, the Holy Spirit works unnoticed within us. Pentecost doesn’t have to be loud and full of noise. It is not only those people who can show a visible manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit who have been filled by the Holy Spirit. That still, small voice of calm, that gentle breath, is a gift in itself.

Perhaps what we need this Pentecost is not for the fire to be sent again, but for our hearts and minds to be opened to the breath of God: as gentle as a summer breeze, as soft as the touch of dew on a morning flower, and as powerful as the river which gently and quietly carves its way through the rock to make hills into valleys. The breath of God gives us life, transforming us from dust into the living reality of the image of God.

Let us breathe deeply of the breath of God this Pentecost, receiving the gift that he offers us in abundance.