

Air and Fire

Chris Cheah

Sunday 30th May 2004, Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:26-36; Romans 8:14-17; John 14: 8-17

There are dangers in using metaphors and images for the undefinable. But what choice do we have?

Maybe it's just the artwork, but I have to admit that I have always had a bit of a niggle about the 'soundness' of that window at the back of the church. That said, I also have to admit that it does provide a fairly reasonable representation of many of the main images and metaphors of the Holy Spirit that appear in Scripture and our church traditions. Four of its 5 panels show the 4 elements of earth, water, fire and air. Of these, air, fire and water are standard. Earth is controversial, but defensible. And the fifth one, which the brochure about our window I think describes as, 'pure spirit', perhaps represents some of the Spirit's other names like counsellor and the ones in today's gospel, which are Advocate and 'Spirit of Truth'. And woven through all those images are people, all tied together in a circle.

While each one of these images and ideas has something important to contribute to our understanding of the Spirit, there isn't time to talk about them all. Today I want to focus on the two most important images which are the ones that figure prominently in today's Pentecost readings which are, of course, air, and fire. Hopefully Rob will let me come back to water, and the (very interesting) earth, as well as some of the others some other time. But then of course he might have run me out of church (or at least the pulpit) for having caused a schism over the window.

Air

As most of us are aware, right from the very beginning, the main biblical metaphors for the Spirit were air images. While I am no language scholar, one of the most important words in the Old Testament is the hebrew word *ruah*, which is a complex word with lots of nuances. Its main meanings are 'spirit' or 'wind' or 'breath'. There should be an insert in your pewsheets which gives the long list of the main uses in the bible of this central word *ruah*.

You may remember those majestic words from the beginning of Genesis in the King James Bible: "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." The Hebrew word translated here as "Spirit" is *ruah*. But other translations, like the New Revised Standard Version (which is the translation we use for our Sunday readings) translates *ruah* as 'a great wind'.

There are many, many other instances of *Ruah* at work in the Old Testament. Like when Ezekiel prophesies over the dry bones of the plain and says:

"Come, O wind, come from every quarter and breathe life into the slain, that they may come to life. I began to prophesy and breath came into them : they came to their feet, a mighty host." (Ezekiel Ch. 37)

This association of spirit, wind and breath continues into the New Testament where the Greek word which we usually translate as 'Spirit' is *pneuma*. *Pneuma* carries similar connotations. And we still have some relics of this in modern English : for example *pneuma* is the root for our present English word *pneumonia* - a disease of breathing.

The Bible underlines this breath/ spirit connection in many places, but perhaps nowhere more vividly than when the resurrected Jesus breathes on the disciples in the locked upper room in Jerusalem, and says 'receive the Holy Spirit', the *pneuma hagia*, the Sacred Breath.

I've been labouring this stuff about words partly because on Pentecost I think it's OK to speak of other tongues, but mainly because it's worth stressing that unlike us, the writers and readers of our sacred texts in the ancient world, both Jews and early gentile Christians simply would never have even heard the word 'Holy Spirit' in the neutral way we do, let alone its more old-fashioned equivalent, the 'Holy Ghost' — (a word which these days risks conjuring up images of something slightly ectoplasmic. No, those Jews and early Christians would have *always* heard the word as 'breath' and 'wind'.

Given this, it's worth putting a bit of effort into teasing out what this breath metaphor can tell us. What follows is in part intended as a teaser for you to do your own work. But can I please encourage you to *really* try and *feel* what it would be like if you, like those Jews and early Christians, did not hear the word 'Holy Spirit' but instead heard the words 'breath' or 'wind'.

For a start they might have thought of their own breath, and how it is almost the first precondition for all continued existence. It is something that is always there whether we are awake or asleep. It is the subtle and most obvious sign that we are still alive.

And although we generally don't think about our breathing, it in fact underpins all that we do. When we exercise vigorously, or even when we think hard, we breathe more quickly. When we are relaxing, or focussed, our breath becomes soft and gentle.

Any singer will tell you (indeed Pat Forbes would almost certainly lecture you at length if you gave her half the chance!) that good breathing is the foundation of good singing. And if we, perhaps a little romantically, think of our lives as being a little like a song then surely we are going to need to be sustained by good breathing. Indeed, what is it that carries and allows words to form, if not the breath ...? Remember, Jesus is the Word. How can you separate the word that is spoken (or sung) from the breath that forms it and carries it?

Breathing has a strongly cyclical quality. We breathe in, and then out. Breath rises then falls, like a wave. So perhaps it was no coincidence that that *ruah's* first act was to breathe on the waters and thereby create day and night, the great diurnal cycle imprinted in the genes of every living creature on the surface of this planet. And as science looks into things in ever more detail we find such breath-like cycles everywhere. One of the greatest, and weirdest, discoveries of twentieth century physics was from quantum mechanics that all measurable phenomena, from the smallest subatomic particles, and all forms of energy, have both a wave (or cyclical) nature as well as a particle nature. I could go on for some time about this kind of thing — maybe over morning tea (!) But suffice it to say that it is almost as though the breath of God has left her signature deeply and subtly imprinted everywhere. The Breath that is the weave and warp of creation.

By the way, in case you are worried about my use of the feminine pronouns of 'she' and 'her' for the Spirit so far let me assure you it actually has a good pedigree. That powerful word *ruah* is in Hebrew a feminine noun. And the Greek word *pneuma* is neuter. It's only with the late arrival of the Latin word *spiritus* (which, you guessed it, also means breath) that the gender switched to the masculine.

Let's return to the breath. Every breath has a beginning and an end. An in-breath and an out-breath, a coming, and a going. A birth and a death and, as the next one comes, a resurrection. It's a process you cannot stop for long by dint of will (just try and hold your breath). And, as I watch my breath, I notice that all that rising and falling also comes out of, and circulates around, a point of stillness and silence which, the longer you look, your breath sort of points towards.

As we breathe in, we receive the gift of life. And since it is a gift we cannot hold onto it. As we breathe out, we practice letting go. Each breath is perfect, necessary and utterly natural. And each breath is individual yet the same.

Watching our breath soon draws out that it, like wind, is in fact air in motion. And a key feature of air of course is that it is everywhere, and permeates everything, envelopes everything, but at the same time is not visible to the eye. Early in John's gospel Jesus says to Nicodemus that "what is born of the flesh, is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit, is spirit." It seems the Spirit works on a different plane to the visible world and only spirit can give birth to spirit. Air is air, and earth is earth. Jesus reinforces this in today's gospel when he says "the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him, nor knows him."

In fact we never really see the air or feel it by itself. Air is formless, odourless, colourless yet is the medium through which colours, odours, sounds travel. Exerting pressure, holding warmth. Breath and wind are actually a principle of motion. We only sense the air when we feel it moving — brushing against us, when we breathe, or when we see what it is doing to the trees, or what it leaves in its wake.

And the air has the habit of seeping into any available crack. Lying in wait to do its work when called at the wind's command. It abhors a vacuum.

Perhaps Jesus' most famous saying of all about the Spirit was when he went on to tell Nicodemus that "the wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, nor where it is going. So with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

This not only tells us what we are and must become. It teaches us the importance of observation. As Jesus was, an observer and lover of the wind as it passed. Aware of, and watching for, the tell-tale signs of its passage.

And Jesus' words also reinforce that the wind is quintessentially not fixed. We have this tendency to want to hold on to good things. So when profound or moving experiences happen, or even Pentecostal 'gifts of the Spirit' appear to be given to us, it is worth remembering that trying to hold on to these or to recapture them is about as sensible as trying to grab hold of the wind.

As seemingly invisible and formless as it is, the air can hold things up. It can carry us like a bird to heights where we can see familiar things from new perspectives, and sometimes to show us things we have not, and could not have, seen before.

Sometimes caressing us like a gentle breeze. Sometimes blowing as a gale. But always calling us. Stirring us up.

While I have perhaps made all this sound a bit complicated, this is not intentional. There is, in fact, almost nothing simpler than breathing. These air metaphors for the Spirit really are perfect and inexhaustible.

Fire

The second Pentecostal elemental image of Spirit on our window is that of fire. It is because of this fire that we are wearing red today.

At first sight, though, this is a little curious because, unlike wind (or even water in John's gospel) fire is not, in fact, equated with the Spirit. Fire does, though, tend to appear at particularly highly charged, dramatic and mysterious moments. In addition to the 'as if tongues of fire' appearing on the apostles at Pentecost, we might recall Elijah being taken up in flaming chariots. And God speaking to Moses in the burning bush.

Fire is perhaps more a sign of where the Spirit is and what it does, than the Spirit itself. Where the wind blows, the fire flares up.

Fire is a primal energy that powers all things. It's in the sun and stars providing the motivating power for all living creation. Fire warms and illumines, with the power to sustain on cold dark nights.

And whether are as a raging inferno, or as the embers glowing on a cold night, fire is a consistently powerful image for humans of almost any culture. Maybe its that ethereal quality which flickering flames have. Beautiful and transient and hot.

As we in Canberra know only too well, fire can spread. Or it can smoulder before erupting unexpectedly when the conditions are right,

And fire is the element which is associated in our general consciousness with passionate love, at least in the early stages. Indeed, popular culture is littered with references to being 'on-fire' with love. People get 'fired-up' for causes.

Of all the saints it is St Paul who for me appears most vividly presents like a man on fire — with all the best, and arguably problematic, characteristics of a man in love. His passionate vision for the building up the Body of Christ, via a 'spot fire' strategy of seeding churches, saw an amazing outburst of energy which did not seem to flag as he ran his race.

Personally, I admire the energy, and sometimes get caught up in, the warmth of such great enthusiasms and loves. And we need them — fire in our bellies, even — if we are to get things done.

But fire is among the most difficult elements to self-generate, contain and sustain. Most loves need to deepen and broaden if they are to grow, or even survive. Given its beauty, it is understandable that people want to reignite this particular fire. But there are risks in attempting to use set patterns and for doing it because of our own wants. One is simply the risk of burn out from lack of fuel. Another is confusing the Spirit with nice group feelings or external 'signs'. And there is even the risk that genuinely fired-up people can sometimes (often unintentionally) burn fragile others.

Which is why it is best to think of this spiritual fire as being at least as much about inner change as outward signs — impressive though those can be. This is perhaps why fire is probably the favourite Spirit metaphor of Christian mystics. Your pewsheet should also have a wonderful quotation from St John of the Cross, the great 16th century Spanish mystic, which talks about how fire transforms wood into itself and uses this as a metaphor for the transforming and purifying effects of inner love for God. I'll leave you to ponder that as homework(!). Reading this really does give a sense of why it was the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament could say that "our God is a consuming fire" (12:29).

And maybe the way fire transforms wood into itself that St John talks about points us to why it was that Jesus told the disciples in today's gospel reading that he had to leave, so that the Spirit of truth could be given to them.

While Jesus was a physical human 'out there' in the so-called 'real world' he was surely as profound a person as it was possible to be. I have no doubt it would have been an amazing experience to meet him. However, at the same time it would, like any experience in the conditioned world of sensory existence, also have been limited. To come to *really* know Jesus fully and, as he said into today's gospel, through him the Father, this *has* to be in the Spirit, because only the Spirit is unbounded, the formless origin of all forms. The Word is spoken on the breath in the love of the fire. Pentecost is the final fulfilment of the Easter season.

So today, Pentecost, is the day when we remember our great birth rite, as the church and people, a birth rite of wind and fire. As we go back into the world of bounded and incarnated forms it reminds us that we are not just material beings, or, if you will, creatures of water and earth. Whatever the trials and tribulations of our life, remember that you are also creatures of air and fire. And we are being called home, home to a place of the heart. Our great love is calling us to himself, calling us to go to a place where we can fly free, soaring in and on another wind, on the bright wind of heaven.

Biblical usages of the Hebrew word 'Ruah'

Primary meanings : wind, breath, mind, spirit

- a. breath
- b. wind
 1. of heaven
 2. quarter (of wind), side
 3. breath of air
 4. air, gas
 5. vain, empty thing
- c. spirit (as that which breathes quickly in animation or agitation)
 1. spirit, animation, vivacity, vigour
 2. courage
 3. temper, anger
 4. impatience, patience
 5. spirit, disposition (as troubled, bitter, discontented)
 6. disposition (of various kinds), unaccountable or uncontrollable impulse
 7. prophetic spirit
- d. spirit (of the living, breathing being in man and animals)
 1. as gift, preserved by God, God's spirit, departing at death, disembodied being
- e. spirit (as seat of emotion)
 1. desire
 2. sorrow, trouble
- f. spirit
 1. as seat or organ of mental acts
 2. rarely of the will
 3. as seat especially of moral character
- g. Spirit of God, the third person of the triune God, the Holy Spirit, coequal, coeternal with the Father and the Son
 1. as inspiring ecstatic state of prophecy
 2. as impelling prophet to utter instruction or warning
 3. imparting warlike energy and executive and administrative power
 4. as endowing men with various gifts
 5. as energy of life
 6. as manifest in the Shekinah glory
 7. never referred to as a depersonalised force

The fire of contemplative love

“Let's look at this loving knowledge and divine light like fire. Fire transforms wood into fire. When fire touches wood, the first thing it does is that it begins to dry the wood out. It drives away moisture, causing the wood to shed the tears it has held inside itself. Then the wood blackens, turning dark and ugly; it may even give off a bad odour. Little by little, the fire dessicates the wood, bringing out and driving away all those dark and unsavoury accidents

that are contrary to the nature of fire. Finally, heating up and enkindling the wood from the outside, the fire transforms the wood into itself rendering the wood as beautiful as the fire is.

The wood is left without any interests or activities of its own. What it has is its weight, which is heavier, and its quantity, which is denser, than the fire. Now the wood has inside itself the properties of fire and it performs the work of fire. It is dry and it dries. It is hot and it heats. It is bright and it illumines. It is much lighter than before. Fire creates all these properties and yields all these effects. This is how it is with the divine flame of contemplative love. ... Fire transforms wood by incorporating it into itself only by first preparing it for transformation.”

—St John of the Cross (16th century Spanish Christian mystic), *Dark Night of the Spirit*
Ch.10 (tr. Miribai Starr)