

Sermon Archive 602

Sunday 6 September, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection on the gift of Air

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An Introduction: The delicacy of the air

Air. You can't see it, but it's there, and without it we die. It's the thing within which we live and move - not **have** our being - that comes from One other than air. But our on-going being would be much more difficult if air were not about. Maybe air is a primal, essential gift from the Giver of Being.

From pre-history, beings like us have been aware of the wind - which we now understand as movement of air. Our own creation stories have the first act of creation being the blowing of a wind over the great waters of chaos. Wind was part of the earliest stories. But I wonder how you'd understand wind if you had no understanding of air.

It is said that the first major advance in recognising air (as a thing) came in the Fifth Century BCE, when a Greek gentleman called Empedocles put an upside-down bucket into a pond of water, turned it over, and wondered what caused the great belch of some invisible thing rising to the surface. What **was** that trapped in the bucket that escaped? His discovery (as it were) of air contributed to his division of all matter into the four classical elements of matter: earth, air, water and fire. People find it a wee bit difficult to do detailed critique of Empedocles's work, since he was the tail-walker (bringing up the rear) of the tradition of writing in poetry. He wrote in verse, rather than in precision! And in his time, even as fashions changed, that was OK - just.

For thousands of years, we believed that air was a single thing - some single, basic element. In the Eighteenth Century, though, Joseph Priestley and Carl Wilhelm Scheele isolated oxygen. Soon others identified other constituent parts. Air was no longer a simple thing - but an intricate coming together and holding together of constituent parts - like an ecological system of its own - Not a basic fact, but a cooperation within the miracle of

life. (Maybe that's too much overlay by the theologian!). But as with anything that isn't basic, monadic, nonsensitive to balance and change, air becomes something more fragile. How is it to be kept in balance?

As I read the history of climate change, I trace the beginnings of our current crises back to the way that we have treated the air. In our industrial age, we burned coal, which poisoned the air. In our petroleum age, we burned oil, which poisoned the air. In our nuclear age, only through our accidents (nuclear was meant to be "air respectful"), we poisoned the air - O, whoops, yes, I forgot the polluting of the air that came from bombs on Hiroshima, and endless tests in the Pacific.

Our ignorance about the function of the air, its delicacy and necessity, was the entry way to the rising sea levels, the fires, the floods, the extremes now causing governments around the world to explore the cluster of ideas under the heading of "climate relocation of communities". The original sin of the climate crisis is our not being sufficiently caring for (or loving of) the air.

Here are two brief snapshots - (as poetic and non-scientific as dear Empedocles's work about the air). The gift of God that is essential for the creature of dust to become a living being - the breath of life. And "agitation in the air" when things are wrong.

The first reading . . .

Lesson: Genesis 2: 4b-7

A Reflection: The essential difference

In the ***other*** version of the creation of the universe, God speaks from on high. God doesn't not touch creation - and everything that comes into being just becomes. The speaking of a word is enough.

In ***this*** version of creation, though, God is amongst it all, scooping up dirt from the ground, and forming a human shape. It is, initially, indeed only a shape. It has no life - until God breathes into its nostrils the "breath of life". Breathing is the critical sign, the critical difference. Other creatures breathe; but here, special attention is taken by the story teller to mark the human being's transition from form to living being through the giving of the breath of life. Later the scriptures will affirm "When you send forth

your spirit, they are created . . . when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust". [Psalm 104: 30 & 29]

We live by virtue of the gift of the air. Air is that basic. Shall we not thank God for the gift, and seek to treat it well?

Lesson: Ephesians 2: 1-6

A Reflection: Agitation in the air

The author of Ephesians is looking for an image of how the world was out of sorts with itself and with its God, before things were put right by the rising of Christ, and the coming of faith. The author's looking for a word picture for a world being kind of invaded by something not right - usurped by something unnatural - people lost in their attempts to get back home again. He comes up with the image of people being captured by "the ruler of the power of the air". There's no developed scholarship on what is meant (then current usages of that kind of image) - but in itself, the "ruler of the power of the air" feels like some unnatural invading force that gets into the very stuff around us, occupying the essential gift we need to live. The air is captured - agitated.

In September of 2009, a great dust storm from the Australian outback, full of sand and grit, arrived in Sydney (and also in Canberra and Brisbane - three and a half thousand kilometres from its Southern tip to its Northern) - and shrouded the city. As the light outside changed, word came from the Bureau of Meteorology that people with breathing disorders should shut the windows and stay at home. Not suffering any breathing disorder, the intrepid young minister of St Stephen's decided to brave the by now most very darkened air to weather the weather and make a dash to the Bondi Junction train station - in an attempt to get to work. The five minute dash (from the front door to the train station) through much reduced visibility was possible, because I knew the way. By the time I got to the safety of the underground, my eyes were itchy, my lips were gritty - and I already was pondering the challenge of the return trip if things got worse.

The dust shrouding the city was from the big red desert areas inland, so everything was a weird shade of rusty red - and the air was full of it. Light didn't shine; it seeped. And it didn't come from above - it sort of

"struggled from around". It was hard not to make a connection with the eerie HG Wells' War of the Worlds image of the earth invaded by Martian dust - a symbol of invasion by something that didn't belong. Putting in a much reduced work day at church, I scuttled back home, shut the door and pulled the curtains. According to the radio reports and occasional peeping through the curtains, the dust got worse. Eventually those who measure these sorts of things, said it was the most dusty air in Sydney for seventy years.

The next morning, upon waking, I opened the curtains in my bedroom at the back of the house. Through the still thick and eerie orange blanket, around where the lane down the back of the house was, there was a black shape. I couldn't tell what it was. Over the next day, as visibility gradually increased, the black object was revealed as a bat, hanging upside down on some power lines. Bats sleep like that, so I imagined, when it woke up, it would fly away. It didn't. It continued to hang there, on the power lines, gradually falling apart as decay did its work. The Council wasn't interested, since it was attached to power lines owned by the electricity company. The power supply company wasn't interested, since there was no public safety issue. The decaying bat hung there, a horrible bedroom view for ages - a reminder to me of the eerie, unnatural time that the air was invaded, creation died, and humans had to hide.

The author of Ephesians reminds the recipients of the letter that while they can remember being invaded, being kidnapped, being dead, there is a mercy calling them beyond the time of the ruler of the powers of the air. Now they are called to heavenly places, where the gift of air is paired with the gifts of immeasurable grace and loving kindness - like a second breathing of the breath of life. Invited to enter that new world, can we continue to serve the storm?

During the Season of Creation, considering the air, we will have prayers for the air, for our husbandry of God's basic gift of life. There may also need to be prayers for courage in our engaging with invades the balanced and beautiful gift that God gives each day. We will come to those prayers soon, but for the moment, we pause for reflection.

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