

Meaningful Exhalations

During last Sunday's homily – as usual a solid and sound proclamation by Fr. Jim – my hearing being what it is, I became distracted. I became distracted with what Fr. Jim was *doing* – not so much what he was saying. I heard sound and words coming out of his mouth and I thought: here we are in this expanded interior space of our church building, full of this invisible mixture of oxygen and nitrogen we call "air". We are all inhaling it and exhaling as simply an exercise of our animal nature. So also Fr. Jim is inhaling it except that when he exhales it, it comes out as words! Sounds that have meaning. He is turning vapor into ideas, images, persuasions energized with meaning, even feeling, convictions. And I thought: that's a miracle; it's a miracle that occurs every day we translate the atmosphere that keeps us alive into meanings that also keep us alive in ways more than biological. For instance when we say, *I love you* or *I have a right to be* or to utter a question like *Why am I here?*

And Fr. Jim was exhaling a whole string of words, sentences. He was turning the atmosphere we live in into an audible constellation of issues, thoughts, needs, insight, hope, faith. Creating a world out of the air we breathe. It's a miracle. And those sounds infiltrate our ears; the sounds out of his mouth transform our brains, our minds, our hearts – indeed alert us to the wisdom of the metaphors, the images he uses. Words issuing from the air we breathe into scenes, pictures, colors . . . within our very minds. And so I sat there thinking, where did all this human capacity to turn our biological function of breathing and exhaling into things so astonishing as words, a homily . . . into a whole dictionary of words, a globe alive with language – out of oxygen and nitrogen? Well, it becomes too much to handle – thought-wise.

But then during last week's Friday Mass following last Sunday's Mass – what did I run into but an Old Testament reading in which the prophet Ezekiel, living in exile after the catastrophe of Jerusalem's fall, envisions a plain covered with dry bones and God asks the prophet: *Can these bones come to life?* To be followed by the command: *Prophesy [speak poetry] over these bones, and say . . . Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! . . . See! I will bring spirit (breath) into you, that you may come to life. . . . From the four winds come, O spirit . . .* And immediately Ezekiel hears a rattling as the bones came together . . . and sinews and flesh upon them. And *they came alive and stood upright.*

You can imagine how popular a passage that was among our black compatriots of our both recent and distant past who found hope in this vision in their unique way – as when out of that vision they composed that delightful spiritual:

The foot bone connected to the leg bone, / The leg bone connected to the knee bone, / The knee bone connected to the thigh bone, / The thigh bone connected to the back bone, / The back bone connected to the neck bone, / The neck bone connected to the head bone, / Oh, hear the word of the Lord! // Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun' / Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun' / . . . / Oh, hear the word of the Lord.

Would it be improper to think of ourselves as dry bones needing spirit, breath not simply to inhale but to exhale in words with meaning, energized hope, faith, love – song, humor – no longer toxic, dissonant but euphonic, polyphonic, harmonious?

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