

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 5, 2023
The Second Sunday in Lent

Solemn Eucharist
11 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*
on
John 3:1-17
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Dance of the atoms

If you have ever visited Oxford, in UK, you might have been blessed with the golden light that sometimes emanates from the limestone of college buildings at sunset. For the space of few minutes, you inhabit an immemorial space and would not be surprised all if suddenly instead of cars you were surrounded by horse carriages, transported to another age. Most of the historic colleges are made of this magical stone owing to the vicinity of the Headington Quarry – something which has been a blessing but also a curse. Over time, the Headington Limestone has been prone to erosion, especially by pollution, and the stones need to be constantly replaced, at great cost for the colleges.

Mercifully, this ruinous constant replacement is needed only for the external stones, those in contact with the elements. But imagine for a moment if say Merton, one of the oldest colleges, needed all the stones it is made of to be replaced over a period of fifty years. At the end of this process, would it still be Merton, would we still refer to it as one of the oldest buildings of the University?

This example mirrors a well-known aspect of our human physiology, namely that basically the whole of the material we are made of is replaced every seven to ten years. There are two key differences though: first that while this process of replacement makes a building stronger, with human beings it is accompanied with deterioration and ultimately dissolution – and second that while Merton keeps looking the same, we human beings vastly change in size and appearance, while retaining similar recognizable features from birth to death. What keeps buildings the same throughout is their form or shape, that is the unique way in which the constantly changing stones are assembled together. In the case of human beings, identity is something much more elusive, hard to pinpoint. Now, listen to the fascinating explanation of this conundrum given by the physicist Richard Feynman who won the 1965 Nobel Prize for his work in quantum electrodynamics: “The thing I call my individuality is a ... dance.... The atoms come into my brain, dance a dance and then go out—there are always new atoms, but always doing the same dance, remembering what the dance was yesterday”.¹

Think of this. The atoms we are made of existed before us and will keep existing after us.² Something which is uniquely ‘who I am’ borrows sets of specific atoms from the universe for periods of 7 to 10 years, then

¹ Quoted by James Hillman in *The Force of Character, and the Lasting of Life*.

² See “How Many Atoms Do You Share With King Tut?”,
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2016/05/14/ask-ethan-how-many-atoms-do-you-share-with-king-tut/?sh=3cacaf1971a5>

gives them back and borrows some others, and so on, until I reach the last loan and cannot borrow atoms any more.

What I am, my individuality, what makes me unique, is this configuration, this way of moving, this ‘dance of the atoms’.

I have been thinking a lot about this since Ash Wednesday. With the other clergy here at Saint Thomas and throughout the day we marked the fronts of hundreds of people with ashes and kept saying: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*. Such a reminder of our transience should sound ominous, instil fear and gloom. Instead, with each new administration of the ashes I sensed how much this simple rite brings comfort, has a soothing effect, helps people to put their lives, anxieties, sorrows, worries into perspective. It helps us to reclaim a virtue which we often neglect, expressed by a marvellous word which interestingly we use in English in its original Latin form, *gravitas*, that is a better appreciation of the things that really matter and a determination to take them with the seriousness they deserve.

But there might be a deeper explanation for the evocative power of this rite – an explanation that dawned on me as I meditated on Jesus’ marvellous declaration to Nicodemus:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

I asked myself: what has wind to do with birth, with being a living entity, and why such an emphasis on the mysteriousness of this wind? Here the images of ashes, atoms, and dance has come back to me.

You can interpret the sentence *You are dust* negatively as meaning that even though your body holds together and is alive now, it is destined to dissolve and disappear. You were dust before, you are not dust for a while, but you will soon turn into dust again.

Significantly though we are not told that *We were dust and in dust we shall return*, but that *We are dust and in dust we shall return* – or, if you want, “We are atoms and to atoms we shall return”! In other words, this sentence can also be interpreted as a reminder not of the inevitability of our eventual dissolution, but of what *now* holds this dust (or these atoms) in the configuration that is ‘me’: look at this dance of the atoms, look at the miracle whereby dust breathes in this moving, feeling, thinking, *living* being which is you!

Scripture does talk about dust, but instead of ‘dance’ it uses another image to explain what holds this dust together, in this passage from the book of Genesis:

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7).

To paraphrase Richard Feynman, I could say that:

‘The thing I call my individuality is God’s breath. Dust comes together, swirls for a while and then is replaced by other dust - there is constantly new dust, but always gathered by the same divine breath’.

As you know breath, wind, and Spirit (*nephesh* and *ruah* in Hebrew) constantly overlap in Scripture³ to express the idea that just as physically we breathe air to live, so spiritually we breathe God to be rescued from everything that hampers, diminishes, highjacks our lives.

³ Cf. “The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life.” (Job 33:4)

The good news is that nothing is irreparable, nothing is beyond rescue. That we are dust means that dissolution is on the horizon yes, but it also is a testimony to the constant, infinite capacity for God's breath to recapture this dust again, as he is doing it now, as he promises to do it at the end of time. We might think that when we die the potential of our individuality to keep the dust together is lost forever, but not God's – his breath will do it again, at the Resurrection of the dead, and the "dance of the atoms" will resume!

To be born from the flesh, from our mother, only happens once – Nicodemus is right about that. Being born from the Spirit, from God's breath, never ends, because this is how we became "living beings" at the beginning, this is why we are alive now, and this is how the dance between earthly dust and divine wind will continue for all eternity.