

## Views from the Pews: Carbon and the bread of life

We hear a lot about carbon these days. We are urged to reduce carbon emissions, to plant carbon-absorbing trees, and to balance the right sorts of carbohydrates in our diet. Where did all this stuff come from, and where does it go?

Carbon atoms were formed in the furnaces of the stars over the billions of years since the Big Bang, and distributed throughout the cosmos as stardust. Carbon is an element, which means it is indestructible. A steady 21% of our air is carbon dioxide, maintained by the ceaseless cycle of exchange between animals that breathe it out and plants that take it in. Carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere acts like a duvet, retaining the heat generated on the earth's surface and warming our climate. Hence the emphasis on reducing carbon emissions, in the hope of keeping the earth cool enough to live on.

All life is carbon-based, which makes carbon part of the essential fabric of our lives, generation after generation. The same atoms pass through, at different times, the rocks, trees, soil and animals that surround us, taken up into new forms and dispersed as those forms break down, over and over again. Because elements cannot now be either created or destroyed, the carbon atoms once present in dinosaurs are still around today. Our bodies each contain **100 trillion atoms** of carbon, temporarily stored in us before passing on again. We lose carbon atoms with every breath and every drop of sweat, passing them back into the endless cycle of life. We take in carbon atoms in our food that could have previously been part of a tree, or a bird, or a loaf of bread, or a glass of wine, or another person, living or dead.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' proclamation that "I am the bread of life" caused a lot of argument among his hearers. There is still no agreement on how his presence enters our ordinary bread and wine at the moment of consecration. But we in our age have one insight denied to our ancestors. When we receive the Eucharist, there is a tiny chance that some of the carbon atoms that once made up the earthly body of Jesus Christ himself might be there in the consecrated bread and wine. At the altar rail, that thought adds an unexpected reality to the liturgical injunction to "Feed on him in your heart with thanksgiving".

*Kim King*