

Homily 23rd Sunday OT 2015
(Isaiah 35:4-7 / Mark 7: 31-17)
6.09.2015

We are told in Luke's gospel how Jesus inaugurated his public ministry in the Synagogue of Nazareth by reading these verses from chapter 61 of the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; He has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted and to announce that captives shall be released and the blind shall see; that the downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors, and that God is ready to give blessings to all who come to Him.*

Luke tells us that once Jesus read these words from the scroll He said *These very words have become true, they are fulfilled in your midst today.*

The unfolding of the Gospel story, which is borne witness to by each one of the four evangelists, gives testimony to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophetic word.

We see God's promises to Israel fulfilled in a special way through Jesus' healing ministry.

Mark's gospel - which is the shortest of the four - remarkably recounts for us more healing miracles than any of the others. Clearly, God's healing work operated in and through Christ-Jesus is central to Mark's telling of the Gospel story.

The Lord's healing work spoken of by the prophet in this morning's first reading from Isaiah 35 is illustrated as having commenced in the gesture Mark shows Jesus to have accomplished in favour of the deaf man unable to speak. Isaiah spoke of *The ears of the deaf being unsealed (...) The tongues of the dumb being made sing for joy.*

Note that I said that God's healing work has *commenced* in Jesus.
This implies that it has not yet been totally fulfilled.

What leads me to say that the healing work that was begun by Jesus has not yet been totally fulfilled?

Well, let me suggest that we need look no further than our own lives to understand the meaning of my statement.

Is the reality in which we find ourselves not proof that we still live in a broken, wounded world? Is it not a fact that our lives are all damaged to some extent?

I think, if we are honest, we would have to admit that we are, all of us, wounded, broken men and women. We are, all of us, hurting creatures who stand in need of God's life-restoring grace.

The truth is that each one of us needs God's healing touch in our lives at some level of our being.

Would any of us claim to be in perfect health in every domain of our make-up?

Would any of us claim to be in top form at every level of our person: physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually?

Admittedly, not everything will be necessarily falling apart in our lives, but there will usually be something a little amiss.

I believe the French playwright gets it in one when he states: *Tout bien-portant est un malade qui s'ignore.*

We might render that little phrase along these lines: *Whoever thinks he or she is well is, in fact, someone who is ill, but ignorant of their sickness.*

The point for us to grasp is that those of us who would say we are in perfect spiritual health are only

fooling ourselves. (St John writes in his First Letter: *If we say we have no sin in us we are deceiving ourselves. We are refusing to admit the truth.*)

To some degree, we are all suffering from an ill, even though we might not fully realise this to be the case, or readily admit to it being so.

The recognition of our weakness should neither frighten nor dishearten us. What it should do is lead us to trust all the more in God's mercy.

Isaiah encourages those of us who may be tempted to become faint-hearted when we think of our weaknesses, wounds and brokenness. I hear the word the Lord gave him for the people of his day is equally applicable to us today.

Courage! Do not be afraid!

What is needed to bring us to experience the healing and fullness of well-being for which we long is the coming of our God in our lives ... His coming to save us!

Isaiah speaks in terms of *the coming of the vengeance of our God*.

We need to understand what he means here, for we could easily get what is meant by the prediction of *the coming of the vengeance of our God* wrong. We can be afraid of the word used (*vengeance*) and, as a result shy away from it and so miss out on the merciful love and freeing power Christ-Jesus is sent to bring to us.

The *vengeance* Isaiah speaks of the Messiah bringing is our salvation, in fact!

We recognise this to be the case when we hear what will accompany *the vengeance of our God* in Isaiah's vision. The prophet speaks in terms of the people being liberated from various ills that debilitate the human body: blindness, deafness, lameness, an incapacity to speak.

It is as if he is saying that with the coming of the Lord's vengeance the people will become fully alive in God.

In light of the imagery used, I would suggest that Isaiah is telling the people that they will become fully alive to the extent that they cease to identify with their idols. For, who cannot see, or walk, or hear, or speak? It is the idols who cannot see, walk, hear or speak! The Scriptures constantly make this point.

Again and again, it was pointed out to Israel that her illness was due to her identification with her false gods.

It is surely significant that the physical ills Isaiah names in his prophecy are the same things the Word of God points to as features of the idols who are served by Israel's oppressors and, on occasion, turned to by the Israelites themselves.

The words of the psalmist come to mind. In more than one psalm he speaks of the idols saying: *They have mouths, but they cannot speak.*

For Isaiah, God's *vengeance* will be Israel's salvation! It will be her restoration, her healing from the ill of idolatry and with that all that binds and debilitates her life as God's People.

The prophet reminds the Israelites that they are a people called to live to God's glory by serving the Lord in freedom of heart

When Isaiah relays the word that *God's vengeance will appear* presumably it was Israel's enemy of the time, her Assyrian oppressor, who was seen as the one to be avenged, but I think we can also see the promise made that the idols Israel had allowed to weaken herself being overcome by the Lord's visit.

The various images used at the end of the prophetic oracle we read today speak of new life being offered to God's People.

I see a kind of re-creation being hinted at here.

Just as the Book of Genesis depicts all as having begun with *the waters covering the face of the earth*, so Isaiah's images bring us back to the waters from which life first emerged.

Not only does Isaiah speak of the human body being made whole, he also speaks of the whole created order being revived, renewed and restored.

He speaks of the water that will gush in the desert, the streams that will flow in the wasteland, the scorched earth that will become a lake and the parched land that will be irrigated with springs of water.

He announces that all this will awaken praise in the people's hearts: *they will sing for joy!*

They will come to new life and celebrate the gift of new life given to them!

What is promised to the people as a whole is also promised to each individual person.

This is where I see today's gospel passage as being particularly significant for each one of us.

I see the man who is brought before the Lord as representative of each one of us individually.

I see the deaf mute of the gospel as representative of each one of us at those times when we allow ourselves to become closed into an unhealthy solitude that cuts off from people around us.

Just think of those periods of suffering we traverse in our lives. What happens? More often than not we allow the pain we feel within to cut us off from the community around us. Frequently, our suffering hinders our communication: our communication with others and their communication with us.

Oh, we may well continue to speak, we may well have all sorts of so-called communication devices at our finger-tips, we may be part of all sorts of supposed communication networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), but all so easily we can be cut off from all real, genuine, heart to heart communication with other real people. We may be *connected*, as we say, to a virtual world, but actually incapable of any genuine conversation, little less dialogue with other persons.

Why is that that we take refuge in easy forms of communication, while avoiding real dialogue and genuine conversation, true opening of our hearts to another?

Is it not because of our fears that heart to heart encounter would show us up as somehow deficient?

We are afraid of appearing vulnerable and obliged to be true in face to face, heart to heart, encounters.

We can be much more comfortable skimming the surface with others than actually allowing ourselves to be encountered at an in-depth level.

A text message is easily resorted to. It basically says nothing.

How many in this Information Technology Age think they are communicating when they are not really! They cannot see for themselves that they are not engaged in real communication, while perhaps others who care for them recognise this to be case.

I can think of persons I know who have become quasi-addicted to tweeting, but who have actually stopped communicating in any real, significant way.

One can access tweets galore, every movement and meeting a person has may be posted on Facebook, but there are no longer any significant words spoken. Intimacy and communication have been lost altogether in this deluge of information flow.

We can all get caught into this way of relating (non-relating really) with others.

Before concluding, let me just make a few remarks about some elements to today's story which I believe are significant and could be instructive for us.

It is surely worth noting that it was other people (his friends) who brought the deaf mute to Jesus and asked for his healing.

The man did not come of himself - at least to begin with.

He was brought before Christ by people who cared for him.

I see this as a reminder to us that we can be so wrapped up in our self that we do not see our real need.

We can be convinced that we are perfectly fine as we are, when, in fact, we are not. Frequently, we need others to recognise our need and intervene in our favour.

That others brought the deaf mute to Jesus, I also see as a call for us to carry in our hearts concern for those who find it hard to communicate their needs.

I read it as a call for us not to fail to bring them to Jesus and implore for them the grace of healing: a healing they may fail to recognise their need of.

The key to, the motor for, recovery in the lives of many people who are afflicted (from whatever ill they suffer) will often be the care and concern friends hold in their heart for them.

If we look at our own lives, is it not frequently the fact that others express their care and concern for us that leads us to seek out help for ourselves?

That being said, it is also surely true that it may well be us whom the Lord wants to use to bring another person to well-being and healing in their life.

What is clear is, as the People of God, we all have a responsibility in each other's regard.

I would also like to draw attention to what Jesus said to that deaf man with an impediment in his speech who was brought before him. Jesus didn't say to the deaf mute: *Hear and speak*. What Jesus said to him was: ***Be opened!***

In saying that, I hear Jesus challenging this man and, through his words to him, challenging us too.

I hear Jesus saying to the deaf mute and to us: ***Come out of yourself*** and also ***Let others in***.

To be open is vital for our well-being.

To be closed in upon ourself holds us a prisoner of our ills.

Finally, I would want to say that there is a baptismal significance to the story recounted for us in today's gospel passage.

We have in our Rite of Christian Baptism the *Ephaphtha* moment. (Those of us who have assisted at a baptism may recall it. If we do not remember this part of the liturgy, it is good for us to be reminded of it, for it is of significance for each one of us.)

At a baptism, the presiding minister blesses the ears and mouth of the catechumen and he or she is told to be opened. It is said: *Open your ears to listen to and hear God's Word* and *Open your lips to declare God's praise*.

Recalling the *Ephaphtha* moment of Christian baptism, I am led to remember something I once heard a priest say as he addressed a group of young people who were gathered for a Youth Evangelisation Conference. He suggested to them that before they listened to the Gospel, rather than the usual signing of the forehead, lips and heart with the sign of the cross (a gesture to accompany the prayer the priest prays quietly that we might understand with our minds, speak with our lips and hold in our hearts the gospel message), what they should do was to sign their ears with a little sign of the cross. He suggested that as they did that they might ask to hear the word God wanted to speak to them through the gospel that day. The point the priest was making is that, for those who are striving to be disciples, all begins with listening to God's word!

What Jesus did for the man brought to Him that day by those caring people who were concerned for his welfare, may He also do for us!

May He open us to hear God's word and give us to echo its proclamation!

May He open our ears to listen and our lips to repeat the Gospel message!

In this Eucharist, we are invited to echo a song of thanksgiving to God as we respond to His word

by singing His praise.

Amen!