

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Isaiah 35:4-7 / Mark 7:31-37)
09.09.2018

As we read God's word this morning, let's begin where many of us need to commence: by welcoming the prophet's encouraging message which is given to sustain God's People in the faith. The reason the Church echoes Isaiah's words in today's liturgy is to offer comfort to the faint hearted, the disheartened among us; it is to give encouragement to the fearful, strength to the weak and solace to the wounded. The promises we hear Isaiah make are reiterated in many other places in the Sacred Scriptures; they are repeated often, pronounced in diverse circumstances. It is from the perspective of Isaiah's encouraging prophecy that we are invited to read this morning's gospel passage. Part of what we hear the prophet promise is shown to have found fulfilment in the particular healing miracle we will consider this morning. Other accounts of Jesus' healing ministry strewn throughout the gospels also come to mind. And, of course, we recall that Christ's healing ministry is pursued in and through the mission of the Church in our own day and age. The call addressed to us then is to read the story of the deaf and dumb man not just as a once-off event, which took place during Jesus' lifetime, but as an intervention which can be thought of as *typical* and, for this reason, applicable to many real-life situations of which we are part. Let's look at the gospel account as it unfolds, pinpointing along the way what we can learn and apply from it.

The first thing we should note is the location in which the suffering man's healing took place. Mark describes this for us in some detail. Clearly, the evangelist considered the setting to be of importance. Jesus was in pagan territory in this region. What happens in this gospel scene denotes an openness on Jesus' behalf to pagan peoples. It manifests that the gospel is for all. I believe it right to suggest that it was not only the man at the centre of the story who was *opened* by the miracle wrought in his favour, but, through what they witnessed, all the people who looked on would have been led to experience the gospel's power to save. We can take it that the ears of the crowd around were opened to hear God's word, just as their lips are shown to have been unsealed to praise the Lord. Later on these people would have spoken to others of what they had seen take place before their eyes. When we look at the text carefully, we are given to see that it was not only the deaf and dumb man and the crowd of onlookers who were opened in the story. It seems to be implied that *the heavens were also torn open* so that God's grace could be showered down upon the pagan people in whose midst Jesus ministered. Jesus is said to have *looked up to heaven*. It is as if it is suggested here that when Jesus addressed His prayer to God the Father He obtained a widening of the Father's heart to embrace the whole human family which He had loved into being. The *heavens opened and justice rained down from above* not only upon God's Chosen People Israel, as the prophet Isaiah had pleaded in chapter 45 of his prophecy, but also those gentiles who dared to trust in Jesus. In today's gospel story the promises made to Israel are seen to have been extended to all peoples in and through the earthly ministry of Christ. Jesus initiated a mission here that the Church has been led to pursue and further develop.

The place those who brought the man for healing had in the story is important. I wonder if we are always as attentive as we should be to the place all the people around us play in our lives? More specifically, as Church, are we as attentive as we should be to those around us who come from beyond the Church's confines? Called to minister in Christ's name in today's world, we are called to listen to all who surround us. We can learn from everyone – including those who are not of our own little fold. It befalls us to pay heed to the demands which these

people make upon us and to respond to them as we see Christ doing in today's gospel passage – without prejudice!

If, in today's gospel account, key to the suffering man's recovery were the friends who led him to get the help he needed, the same is often true for us. Frequently it is others who lead us to find the help we stand in need of.

It is also true to say that we can be those who lead others to the source of healing they require. In the story we read this morning the group of people who brought the suffering man to Jesus evidently cared enough about him to ask Jesus to intervene in his favour. Recognising that they themselves couldn't do for this man what he needed, they trusted in the compassion of Christ whom they begged to heal him. Those who brought the suffering man to Christ are shown to have been true friends. We might ask: As Christian people, are we, as Wesley says we should be, *friends to all*? Are we the sort of people who try to bring hope to hurting people by leading them to Christ?

Now let's note how Jesus dealt with the man who had been brought before him. *Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd.* What delicate discretion the Master manifested in doing this! Jesus' sensitivity to how people might feel is drawn to our attention. Here, as elsewhere, the Master showed Himself to have infinite respect for those to whom He ministered. Jesus clearly never sought to make an exhibition of anyone who was suffering. He certainly didn't want that the deaf mute be troubled by the curious gaze of onlookers and so He avoided throwing the poor man into the limelight. When Jesus sidestepped pushing the deaf and dumb man into the public arena where he could be viewed and scrutinised by all, it is confirmed for us that Jesus didn't want to act in a self-promoting way; He didn't seek to show off His healing power. Jesus never ministered to win acclaim for Himself. Christ's concern was always the person(s) to whom He ministered; He thought of these people's well-being and their advantage, not His own. While it was never the Lord's way to exploit others, never His way to make use of anyone or of any situation to advance Himself, can the same be said of us? We would do well to examine our ways of dealing with people who come to us or who are brought to us for help, as well as those to whom we ourselves reach out in a bid to offer them assistance. We should ask ourselves if in whatever good we accomplish, whatever we seek to do in other people's favour, our real concern is the person(s) we are tending to. Could it not be – at least sometimes, albeit very subtly – ourselves more than others that we are really concerned about?

In Jesus' one-to-one encounter with the man I would like to zoom in on one word which could be considered the key to our understanding of this whole gospel story: *Ephphatha. Be opened!* That word/those words which were addressed to the deaf and dumb man are addressed to all of us; so much so that they have found their way into the Church's baptismal liturgy. The *Ephphatha* prayer which we find in the baptismal liturgy asks that the ears of the newly baptised be opened to hear the word of God and their tongues loosened to speak God's praises and announce His gospel message.

How relevant the call to *be opened* is in today's world in which so many people lived barricaded lives – walled in upon themselves. In contemporary society so many are enclosed in physical, spiritual, mental and emotional ghettos. A whole multitude of people live isolated lives, cut-off from any real human interaction – even and sometimes especially those who at the level of cyber communication would claim to be the most connected people in relation to the world around them. I heard just this past week of one man who spends a little over two thirds of each day in a room alone, connecting with a host of followers (*friends*, or whatever they call themselves) – people who *vision* what he does on his computer, but who

enjoy no real, actual contact with him or he with them. While all the people involved in the computer game business this man runs may imagine that they are in communication with him and each other, they are, in reality, all locked into a space of isolation.

If we were to believe the advertising world we might be fooled into imagining that we live in an era of communication. After all, we have more and more channels of social media available to us and more and more means of communication at our disposal than ever before, but, for the most part, there is little or no real human interaction going on in cyberspace. Through the internet, people enter into a *virtual world*, not to say, a false world – what is virtual is not completely real or totally true. In many senses the cyber world is a fictive world. Even where and when people actually meet today, so often they speak words, but say nothing of any real meaning. When some folk do try to speak meaningfully, it happens that they are just not heard.

The world we live in is increasingly an idolatrous world and we ourselves are its idols. What the Sacred Scriptures say of idols could be said not only of some people we know, but also of ourselves at times: *They have ears, but they cannot hear. They have mouths, but they cannot speak. They have eyes, but they cannot see.* These words which the Bible applies to idols could be equally applied to those who are dead. We can conclude from this that many in today's world – sometimes ourselves included – are like dead persons walking!

In the gospel story heard this morning there are elements that some find shocking. I can't pass over these without making a comment. I am thinking of Jesus' very earthy gestures. We read: *Jesus put His fingers into the man's ears and touched His tongue with spittle.* This physical contact might surprise us and even, as I've said, cause us to be shocked, but I think these gestures make a point we would be foolish to ignore. They flag up for us the need we all have for physical contact. They draw to our attention the fact that incarnation is not only important, but unavoidable. The French use the word *incontournable* for unavoidable, making the point that *you just can't get around the thing you are trying to avoid.* We cannot get around – nor should we want to avoid – incarnation. And yet, sometimes we do! Incarnation is *vital* in the literal sense: it is essentially *life-giving*! Jesus is *the word made flesh*. He wasn't afraid to take on our flesh. He didn't shy away from humanity – including those things which we might think of as repulsive in our own human condition. It is precisely because Jesus took on flesh and from that flesh reached out to and touched the wounded people He encountered that He could make *the deaf hear and the dumb speak*. When Jesus took on flesh He took on our *flesh of sin* – to quote the apostle. Nothing held Jesus back from reaching out to wounded, fallen humanity. He went as far as to touch the lepers – the untouchables. On the cross Jesus became so diminished in His person that He was hardly able to speak, hardly able to hear. He made Himself like the deaf and dumb, the living dead, He healed. In the end, Jesus died for our sake. He touched and entered into death. Through contact with Christ – *the Living One* – the dead were brought back to life. The Risen Christ is depicted by ancient iconography to have stretched out His hand to pull forth from the grave and the underworld Adam and Eve who were wounded, imprisoned and held captive therein. He is shown to lead our first parents from the depths of hell so as to restore them to that life in communion with God and with each other they forfeited when they fell into sin and lost their free communion with God and their easy communication with each other.

We come to the end of our reading of the text. The gospel story of the healing of the deaf and dumb man ends on a wonderful note of re-creation/restoration for all who became part of the healing of their wounded brother. Let me explain. It is said of those who brought this man to Jesus: *Their admiration was unbounded* and they praised God. *They exclaimed: He has done all things well.* I hear in those words an echo of – at least an illusion to – the Genesis creation

story. It was God who first admired the work of His own hands and exclaimed how good it was. In today's gospel passage we are told the people praised God. There is a psalm which says: *To You our praise is due, O God*. The Hebrew scholars explain that in that psalm verse the word used for praise has the same root as that which is employed to speak of the creation of man in God's image and likeness in the Book of Genesis. This leads some scholars to suggest that we could literally translate the psalm verse to exclaim: *It is praise which makes us resemble You, O God*. By their praise of God all the people were made to resemble the Lord; their original likeness to the Lord was restored, renewed. This is what we should all long for, for ourselves and for each other, as we celebrate this Sunday which is hailed by the Church as a day of re-creation, the day of resurrection.

May we be opened to God's grace at every level of our being. May the seal of those graves in which we have taken false refuge be prised open. May the ear of our hearts be opened to hear God's word.

May our tongues be loosened to proclaim God's praise and announce the gospel. May we be loosened, set free, from all that binds us, as Lazarus was from those bandages in which he was wrapped until Jesus said: *Unbind him. Loose him. Let him go free*. At that moment Lazarus' share in the final resurrection of Christ was prefigured – and so too was ours. This is the mystery we celebrate today, enlightened by the words of the prophet and the gospel story of the healing of the deaf mute: the mystery of our being called to share in the life of the Risen Christ.

Amen!