

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Ps 146

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

I imagine many of you have seen video footage of when people who were born deaf get an ear implant allowing them to hear for the first time. Needless to say, their reactions are quite extraordinary. When people hear their parents' voices—or in some cases their children's voices—for the first time... it *always* moves them to tears. And I must admit that—even though I'm not one to get teary all that often—whenever I watch these kind of videos it can even get a little dusty in the room that I happen to be in! The people in these videos know at the core of their being that their life will never be the same again – that their experience of life has gone to a whole new level. And they understand this fact *instantly*.

And we who see their reactions can't help but ponder on how much we tend to take something like our hearing for granted. Most days we never give it a second thought, and yet here they are in tears because they can finally experience something that we've experienced every day of our lives.

We'll keep all of this in mind as we turn to look at the Gospel passage we've just heard.

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In today's Gospel we have a rare example of an actual word spoken by Christ (rather than a translation) – the Aramaic word “Ephphatha”, which means “be opened”. This is the command that Jesus utters when he touches the ears and, with his spittle, the tongue of a deaf and speech-impaired man, who immediately gains the ability to hear and speak intelligibly.

This episode is also the inspiration for an optional moment in the rite of baptism for children, when the priest or deacon touches the ear and mouth of the child and says:

The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ear to receive his word and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.

In the old baptismal rite, the priest would even use his own saliva, so as to imitate Christ's actions even more. (Perhaps it was a good thing we let that little rubric go!)

And while the physical healing wrought by Christ would have certainly been remarkable on its own merits, there are deeper layers to this healing miracle that make it emblematic of Christ's entire mission.

Firstly, we should recall that there was a famous prophecy about the Messianic age from the prophet Isaiah, which we heard in our first reading:

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.”

In this light, we can see that the healing miracles of Jesus were not designed simply to attract attention—in the way a magician’s tricks might—but rather they were intended as clear signs that Isaiah’s prophecy was being fulfilled, and thus that the Kingdom of God was at hand. And as can be seen in the reaction of the crowd to this miracle, messianic hope was indeed being aroused by signs such as these.

Remember the image I began my homily with – of deaf persons weeping as they hear for the first time. Well there is a parallel with the Christian life of faith.

Faith is not just a set of beliefs in a category to the side of the rest of our life – it’s not just something we think about on a Sunday morning and that’s it. Faith is the *lens* by which we view all of existence. And when the penny drops—and we really *get* the faith for the first time—our entire existence takes on a different shape, as though we were finally given use of a heretofore unknown sense.

And indeed, while deafness and dumbness are serious physical handicaps, a more serious handicap is a heart hardened and closed by sin to the saving word of God. And it is this deeper wound that Jesus primarily came to “open”, so as to enable us to fully enter into relationship with God and with others. Christ became one of us so that mankind—made inwardly deaf and dumb by sin—would become able to hear the voice of God, a voice of love speaking to our hearts, and would learn to speak in the language of love towards God and others.

And this—I would argue—forms the centrepiece of what you might call “Jesus’ plan for the world.”

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As we know, human history is a long parade of wars and rebellions; ideologies and political intrigues; revolutionaries who end up becoming indistinguishable from those they revolted against. And in the face of all this, many people ask what Jesus’ grand plan for society was. Was he a capitalist, a communist, an anarchist, a distributist?

Well, I would argue that in our Gospel today we see the closest thing we have to an answer. We see that Jesus goes about transforming the world, not by imposing a grand plan upon society, but via the *renovation of human hearts*, one heart at a time. His Kingdom is made manifest, not in the dramatic upheaval of civil society, but in the *renewed humanity* of a once-wounded man. Such renewal and rebirth leads to persons capable of sanctity, and who—armed with forgiveness and self-sacrifice—are able to serve as hosts of the Kingdom of God.

And just as Jesus healed the deaf and mute man in the Gospel, so too does he come to *us*—today—with the offer of new life. Whether we admit it or not, we are *all* deaf or blind or mute to God’s design in some way. So much in our world stands in need of renewal, including within the Church. So many hearts have been handed over to hatred and despair; so many lives to the enticements of evil. And so the Lord says to us as he said to the deaf man’s ears: “*Ephphatha! Be opened!*”

If we hold tightly to a sense of entitlement or to patterns of habitual sin, or cling to the pain of past hurts, refusing to forgive – the Lord gently touches our clenched fists and says, “*Be opened!*”

If we have closed our eyes to the plight of the suffering ones in our midst – the lonely, the refugee, the homeless, the unborn – the Lord gently places his hands on our eyes and says, “*Be opened!*”

And if we have closed our hearts to hope – if we have become cynical with life, or grown weary in our praise of God, or just find the trials and tribulations of life too much to bear – the Lord gently caresses our overly-cautious hearts and says, “*Be opened!*”

Friends, the Kingdom of God advances today—just as it did 2,000 years ago—by the personal touch of the Lord’s healing love. And that path towards the renewal of the world begins here in this church, and it begins here in our hearts.

And if it means needing to go to confession after many years away, *so be it*. And if it means turning our lives around, with all the difficulties this involves, *so be it*. Compared to the Lord’s call for our life, nothing else really matters.

So, nourished by the sacraments, may we make *our own* the mission given to Isaiah in our first reading: “Proclaim to all who are faint of heart, ‘Take courage! Do not be afraid! Behold, your God is coming.’”