

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 7:31-37

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

REFLECTION 1: HEARING AND LISTENING

While it is one thing to hear, it is quite another to listen. It is possible to be part of a conversation and then suddenly become aware that the other person may have been hearing, but wasn't truly listening. For some among us, listening is difficult because of a hearing impairment. This was the experience of a man featured in today's Gospel. Jesus did not consider the man merely as a case – he considered him as an individual. The man had a special need and a special problem, so Jesus 'took him aside from the crowd all by himself'. With great tenderness, Jesus dealt with him in a way that spared his feelings and in a fashion he could understand. This opening of the ears and the release of the tongue is part of the rite of every baptism. When we were baptized the priest said the prayer of Ephphatha. He touched our ears and prayed we would hear the word of God. Then touching our mouth, he prayed that our lips would proclaim God's word (Mark 7: 31-37).

In the first reading the prophet Isaiah implored those who were frightened and weighed down by the world's struggles. Be strong! God sees! God cares! God comes to save! Salvation, the prophet points out, will be experienced as new sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, healing for the lame and a voice that sings for the mute. This vision of hope and healing for a fragile world was fulfilled in Jesus. This deaf mute was a prisoner in a cell of self; no one could reach in, nor could he reach out. But faith was growing in some of those people who lived in the district of the Ten Cities of the Decapolis. Those believers brought the man to Jesus with the hope that he could make a difference. No hint here of the sins of the parents being visited on their children. Jesus' words to the man were 'Be opened'. Jesus' healing power involved the gift of freedom. A door that had been tightly sealed was now flung open and a freed man, a hearing and fluent person stepped into a promising future.

The scripture for this Sunday from Isaiah, James and Mark, brings us a message of hope, healing and restoration. By looking up to heaven, Jesus indicated his divine source of power to heal. His 'Ephphatha' (Aramaic for 'Be opened') could be understood as Jesus' prayer of trust in the Father. Through his words and works, he embodied the power of God, which continues to bring healing and salvation to a broken and needy world.

REFLECTION 2: OFF BY HIMSELF

Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man's ears and his face lifted towards heaven, he groaned and cried out, 'Ephphatha' (Be opened). These words are repeated at each baptism when the priest prays that the ears of the newly baptised will be open to hear the promise of Jesus in the words of sacred scripture. As Jesus touched the man's tongue, the priest touches the lips of the newly baptised and the new disciple is charged to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. The command 'Ephphatha' challenges each of us today to hear the word and share it by becoming a living example of the Gospel.

Throughout the history of humanity it is only in recent times that men and women have been able to correct hearing loss – and nowadays, in some cases to reverse certain types of deafness. Jesus' treatment of the deaf man was marked by a very tender kindness (Mark 7: 24-31). Instead of subjecting the man to further embarrassment by underscoring the difficulty of his situation, 'Jesus took the man off by himself away from the crowd.' Jesus tended the man and prayed, immediately the man heard and spoke plainly. We can well imagine ourselves in the place of the deaf man being ministered to by Jesus. Jesus is eager to lead us 'off by ourselves and away from the crowd,' if only we allow him. There, in quiet intimacy, he invites us to show him our deeper wounds, our greatest need, our most shameful sin. When we do so we are met with no reproach, no condescension, no impatience. We are welcomed with love, tended with care and patience, and either healed or made stronger for the burden that is ours to bear. As Jesus has ministered to us, we are called to do the same for one another. We need only to use our imagination, make a few discreet enquiries and listen to the cries of the people of our times. We need not look far to find someone to whom we can minister as Jesus has ministered to us – Jesus works through people. It does no good to cast blame or try to pin responsibility on someone else. The wants of the needy and the cries of the poor make known the agenda of those who belong to Jesus. Moreover the manner in which Jesus ministered to people has set the bar for all who serve in his name. Very much aware of the dignity of others, Jesus treated them as beloved brothers and sisters. He did not judge them by their outer appearances or the wealth they had managed to amass.

The second reading today from the Letter of St. James draws our attention to the preferential option for the poor. James keeps us mindful that good words and positive intentions are to be translated into good works; 'Show no partiality' he announces. God shows no favours, seeing others as God sees them is one of the great challenges of our faith. The poor, the deaf, the blind and the lame are God's royalty and we should see it as our privilege to minister to them. In them we find God and tend to the needs of the body of Christ. Were it not for them, we would not be whom we are – disciples of Jesus, who takes us off by ourselves and away from the crowd to tend to us, so we can tend to others.