



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak

Readings: Isaiah 35: 4-7, Ps 145, James 2: 1-5, Mark 7: 31-37

My mother was deaf – not very but enough to be a nuisance for her – the result of a life threatening childhood infection. As she was, at eight years old, solemnly informed that she would probably die, I suppose partial deafness was a lucky escape. But she always said, rather ungratefully it seemed, that she would rather have been blind. People, she argued and not without evidence, could see you were blind and made allowances accordingly. Deaf and you were often treated like an idiot or a slow witted drain on the conversation, always struggling to grasp the drift, long after the intellectual train had left the station with the others on it, well on their way to the next subject.

But deafness is about more than physical limitations or damage. There is deafness and deafness. One of the more humorous ones is the famous ‘marital deafness’ in which the tone employed (ie Order or Complaint mode) seems to operate an automatic ‘off’ switch in the victim’s/partner’s head. Message understood but not received.

There is also an emotional deafness – messages we simply cannot receive because the implications are too threatening or requiring change that we have neither the will, courage nor capacity currently to undertake.

There is the deafness of pride. In this we invest such capital in our own rectitude that it is seemingly impossible to hear any message that contradicts our self-perceived wisdom. It is often known for short as pig-headedness though this seems a little harsh on our porcine friends.

There is another kind of deafness which has huge societal implications and is usually born of a mixture of cowardice and indifference. There is a social deafness in an immoral society that is often fatal to its weaker members whether it be the old, the vulnerable or the armies of the unborn sacrificed on the altars of the new materialism.

Christians can be notoriously deaf to the Word of God. Proclaiming our assent to the proclamation, 'This is the Word of the Lord.' and then failing to act upon it is infinitely more culpable than the failures of those who have never heard it.

As Mother Theresa so pithily put it many years ago, 'Prayer without action is blasphemy.'

Back around the Galilee shore, the physically deaf man who has trouble speaking is brought to Jesus. The intercessors ask Jesus to lay hands on him and we witness one of the most physically intimate miracles of the New Testament.

Notice the first thing Jesus does. He takes the deaf man away from the crowd to be alone with Him. Ministry is an intensely personal thing and, while much of it is necessarily carried out in the public eye, there are times which are quintessentially private. This man is getting, and needs to

comprehend that he is getting, Jesus' full and undivided attention. There is a tenderness and consideration in all this which underlines the personal nature of Jesus' ministry to the individual. The deaf man is not a statistic, he is a person. Christianity is not a philosophy, it is a relationship. So, in the midst of all this, the deaf man is no longer one of a crowd but a man on his own before Jesus.

Jesus does not speak to him. Jesus communicates, as you must with the deaf, with signs. He doesn't lay His hands on the man's head, no. He actually puts His fingers into his ears. It is an act of extraordinary intimacy. With the penetrating touch of Christ the closed doors of sense are about to swing open and the long years of aloneness end in a cascade of joyful noise.

The sign is being given but another sign is being given too. Jesus spits. We don't normally associate spitting as something beneficial. When a former Vice-President of the United States once described his job as, 'Not worth a bucket of warm spit.' he was not advertising its benefits. Jesus spits and touches the man's tongue, the jammed organ of response. Jesus is linking his tongue, the Gospel proclaimer of the Word of God, the dispenser of the justice of the Father, the mouth that had suckled at the breast of Our Lady, with this handicapped child of God. Seldom can healing have ever been so direct and personal. The healing waters flow direct from the mouth of God.

But we are not finished yet. The sevenfold action that encompasses this miracle is still unfolding:

- 1) Jesus takes the man aside
- 2) He puts his fingers in ears

- 3) He spits
- 4) He looks heavenward
- 5) He sighs
- 6) He says 'Ephphatha'
- 7) He commands discretion.

The deaf man is included in every stage of the understanding. Jesus looks up to heaven. Man needs to know the origin of his healing and his salvation. Jesus looks to the Father. We come to the Father by the Son. Jesus sighs or groans. He is praying in the way St. Paul, His great servant, later commends to us, with sighs too deep for words as the Holy Spirit prays through us.

Here then we see a picture of the Holy and Glorious Trinity at work. It is also inarticulate, rather like the deaf and dumb man. It is not formulated speech but an earnest of deepest wordless longing. Even the healing is sympathetic to the sufferer.

And then Christ speaks. We are vouchsafed a rare word in the original Aramaic. 'EPHPHATHA!' It is a command and it means simply, 'Be opened'.
OPEN UP.

The Gospel tells us simply that his ears were opened and the 'string of his tongue loosed' and he spoke clearly and accurately. The Word who made him has spoken to Him and he is healed. Only the Lord can unblock the channels, only the Lord can bring him healing. It is one of the lessons of discipleship. Very often we have become early frustrated with our own inability to heal, save, convert our neighbour, family or friend. Yet that is

not our task. We are to bring that person to Jesus. It is by His power alone that change is possible.

The other great truth that this miracle reminds us of is that, if we have not heard we cannot speak. If we do not let Jesus unblock our stubborn ears and loosen our stumbling inarticulate tongue, we will not be able to preach the Gospel which is, after all, our sacred calling. We may have become deaf to God's Word for a variety of reasons. We don't want to change. We don't think anybody in modern society will listen. We are afraid of being thought foolish or out of step. Our own faith is rather fragile and needs wrapping in cotton wool and being reserved for private indulgence only.

So, as we hear it, we need to speak it. Coming to Mass is not simply so we can leave with a warm feeling and put a tick in the box, 'job done'. The word 'mass' itself comes from the Latin word for sending us out into the world. The Mass is the summit of our worship and the beginning of our evangelism. Mass that ends at the door of the Church is an insult to Christ. 'You have done all this for me Lord but rest assured I shall not be doing anything for you, least of all trying to share your amazing love with my fellow man'.

We are the deaf who have been made to hear, the dumb whose tongue has been loosed. We have been opened by and to Christ. We are to proclaim His glory and what He has done for us and waits to do for others as we bring them to Him in faith and prayer and love.

This week's homework – tell someone about Jesus.

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