Dear Friends,

Today’s Scripture also invites us to open our ears to hear the word of God and to allow the Holy Spirit to loosen our tongues to convey the Good News of God’s love and salvation to others. The first reading (Is 35:4-7), reminds us that God’s eyes are constantly focused on the helpless. God especially cares for “the frightened, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute,” and He encourages the powerless to “be strong and fearless.”

In this very practical pastoral letter, James points out to the members of the Church that they should treat others, whether they are rich or poor, with equal honor and courtesy. James is not writing speculative theology, but reacting to real hurts inflicted on real people, and calling real Christians to a higher level of charity and responsibility. The poor man, James says, is poor in the eyes of the world but rich in Faith because he recognizes his dependence on God for everything and acknowledges that dependence in the way he lives and acts. James insists that Christians “should show no partiality.” In a society like ours, which values people who have much money, great power, and/or celebrity status, James’s admonition turns our cultural assumptions upside-down and inside-out. That’s what makes our showing respect to everyone we encounter, despite social and/or economic status, and our treating all people as children of God, our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, a most valuable, living witness to Jesus who died to save us all. St. Theresa of Kolkata would often remind people that God visits us in the guise of the poorest.

Today’s Gospel describes how Jesus, by healing a deaf man with a speech impediment, fulfills Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy, “The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” Mark uses the highly unusual word mogilalon (literally: with difficulty of speech) to describe the deaf-mute whose healing is recounted in today’s Gospel reading, for mogilalon is precisely the same Greek word used in the Septuagint (Greek version of the Hebrew Bible) for the word dumb in Isaiah 35:6. In a culture where physical disabilities and sickness were commonly interpreted as signs of a person’s sinfulness (as a “curse” from God), many Jews would have considered this man to be stricken by God — a sinner. Hence, Jesus shows tender consideration for the weak by leading the man away from the crowd so as not to embarrass him. The miracle is described in seven ritual-like steps: (1) Jesus leads the man away from the crowd, (2) puts His fingers into the man’s ears, (3) spits on His own fingers, (4) touches the man’s tongue with the spittle, (5) looks up to Heaven, (6) sighs, (7) and speaks the healing command: “Ephphatha!” (“Be opened.”) Jesus humbles himself to share the limitations of this one deaf man. By undignified dumb show, the love of the Lord heals the deaf man’s soul as well as his ears. Jesus’ listeners, who were familiar with Hebrew Scriptures, would have recognized another signal in Jesus’ command, “Ephphatha! Be opened!” The ancients believed that words contain power. If translated, the word would lose its power.

We all suffer from spiritual deafness at one time or another. It is not necessarily that we can’t hear. Sometimes we don’t want to hear. Just as we don’t want to listen to a person who has a different opinion on some subject, we also don’t want to listen to God. But Jesus does all things well. He can heal us just as surely as he healed the deaf man. We need to give him the time and the opportunity though. That could mean spending more time in prayer. And possibly spending that prayer time listening, instead of just asking for our needs. One thing is sure. Jesus will heal us of our spiritual deafness if we humbly ask him to.

Be blessed, Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

September 5, 2021

I can hear OK! Have you a mirror? I want to see how I look!
WORSHIP & MEDITATION

FIRST READING
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing. (Is 35:5-6)

PSALM
Praise the Lord, my soul! (Ps 146) Or Alleluia.

SECOND READING
Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? (Jas 2:5)

GOSPEL
“He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” (Mk 7:37)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

From the time we are born into this world until we die, our human radar picks up signals about how to respond to life. What we picked up on when we were very young carries an even greater power. The messages we receive and process tell us what we are “supposed” to do with our feelings, how to understand and cope with disappointment, anxiety, failure, death, illness, and what to expect out of life. As life unfolds for us, these radar messages kick in and resonate in us at very deep levels. Sometimes what we have learned is helpful and sometimes it is not. The stories we have been told, especially when we are young, about how life is best lived and how to negotiate its pain carry a heavy weight.

Life can be challenging and frightening. Sometimes, it really hurts to be a human being. It also can be quite unpredictable and, at times, unfair. We face our vulnerability and brokenness of all kinds: physical, emotional, and spiritual. It doesn’t take much for life to quickly fall apart. What we knew to be familiar and true is gone and something we relied upon, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, can be taken away. It is hard to confront our limitations and sit with our incompleteness. Often, life hurts us so much that we find ourselves sitting in a pool of sadness, not sure what we are supposed to do. It is particularly hard when the signals we have inherited tell us that we need to be successful in what we do, and we have to avoid life’s unfairness. We can feel like a failure, wondering what precisely we did to deserve this fate, or ruminate about what we did not do correctly. But it’s really not about us. We are part of a bigger picture and a much more fascinating story!

If we cease doing battle with life’s incompleteness and see ourselves, as God does, on a journey toward wholeness and completeness we can better accept our disappointments and stand firm. The prophets told us, and Jesus reassured us: Be strong! Fear not! Sometimes we have to update our stories and replace them with newer, more accurate ones. When we make God’s story our own and tune our radar into His voice, what we hear is all about restoration, healing, and rejuvenation! This is true even when we think we have hit rock bottom and can go no further. There is always hope. Remember the words of Julian of Norwich: God made us, God loves us, and God keeps us. Now, listen to God when He says, “be opened!” Be healed and allow your stories to change.
The first reading, Isaiah 35:4-7, “When the words, ‘Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing,’ were first spoken by Isaiah of Jerusalem, the immediate reference was the hoped-for return and restoration of Israel after the Babylonian Exile. By the time of Jesus, those words were understood as pointing to the further restoration of Israel in the messianic age.” (Dennis Hamm S. J.) The Jews are returning to their homeland after decades of exile in Babylon. Their arrival causes great friction with the other tribes already there, especially the Edomites. Hence, Isaiah reminds Israelites that when God leads his people home, He will work miracles on behalf of those who need it most: blind, deaf, lame, and mute persons. The Lord God’s message expresses the promised redemption in terms of health, healing, and well-being for the disabled. Through Isaiah, He assures them that He blesses their return, and that they should be confident and not fearful. The prophetic admonition opens with one of the most frequent Biblical commands, “Fear not.” The life-giving “streams of water bursting forth in the desert” symbolize whatever is needed to achieve peace and fullness of life. The prophecy gives the Israelites the assurance that God will continue to save them from their enemies, will open their eyes to the reality of what He is providing for them, and will open their ears to what He has to tell them through His priests and prophets. This reading from Isaiah echoes the words of compliment given to Jesus by the people in today’s healing story, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.”

The second reading, Jas 2:1-5), “Last week’s reading had James in one of the best known passages: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father," James writes, "is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Period. James makes it clear: Show me what you do, and I’ll tell you if you are religious or not. Perhaps he had heard what Jesus says in Matthew 25: the judgment before God is going to be about the hungry fed and the prisoners visited and the sick cared for. Period.

Now immediately after telling us how to test true religion, James goes after the problem at hand. This is what we heard today. He writes (in the NRSV translation): "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? What a question! We tend to think that what I claim to believe I believe- no matter how I act. James will have none of this and he moves directly to confront us with a question just as valid now as all those centuries ago. What happens, he asks, when you gather on the Lord’s Day and there you all are, and just before the song begins, somebody you don’t know walks in. What if this person is wearing well-tailored, expensive clothing and some costly jewelry? What reaction do you have? Where do your thoughts go? What do you say and what do you expect to happen? Now, James says, what happens in the very same circumstances - the Lord’s Day, all together ready to pray and read scripture- and someone walks in wearing shabby, ill-fitting clothes that have not been washed in months. What reactions do you have? What do you say to this person? What is your instinctive reaction? What do you expect to happen?

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

The deaf man in the gospel text of today was brought to Jesus by the crowd. Jesus takes him aside away from the multitude. Was he doing this to demonstrate that basically an encounter with God in the person of Jesus is a private experience even if it is often mediated by the community? And in this case, what an intimate encounter it was! Jesus “put his fingers into the man’s ears and touched his tongue with spittle.” Spittle is a body fluid that carries the identity of the person. With this man who has some speech impediment, Jesus shares something of his own identity.

And Jesus says, “Ephphatha” (Mk 7:34). The body language of Jesus, including the sigh, and the “Ephphatha” suggest an act of liberation. The people of Israel had expected the messiah to be a liberator – of a political type. But here it seems Jesus wants to avoid public spectacle. The messianic encounter is a private experience. Jesus is the messiah who wants to establish the kingdom of hearts marked by the transformation of individuals.

Ephphatha is an Aramaic expression. Aramaic – which was the mother-tongue of the Jesus – was the language spoken in the regions surrounding Galilee and may be also in parts of Syria. In Hebrew, Syria is referred to as ‘Aram’. It is interesting that the Gospel of Mark which was written is Greek, often uses Aramaic expressions. The other examples include: Talitha Kum (Mk 5:41), Abba (Mk 14:36), Hosanna (Mk 11:9); “Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?” (Mk 15:34). It is possible that wherever Aramaic expressions appear in the Gospels there was an eyewitness account. That is, someone who remembered the story with all its details narrated it to the gospel writers. So did the deaf man himself live to tell this story in the Markan church? Or does it have some allusion to the rite of Baptism? Or is it that this story had become so powerful for the early Christian community that they remembered the details of the expressions of Jesus?
Messianic Secrecy:

“And Jesus ordered them to tell no one…” (Mk 7:36a)

Messianic Secrecy is another of the peculiarities found in the synoptic gospels, particularly in Mark (Mk 7:36, 8:30, 9:9). There are several possible explanations for this. Consistent with our interpretation of the gospel text of today, we can say that Jesus does not want to mobilize a crowd of people around him who would politically rally around him as the messiah who could solve all their problems. Jesus wants to insist that the extraordinary phenomena associated with his public ministry are only signs. Jesus’ concern is the real transformation of the hearts of people that happens without force or seduction. He wants our own response to him to be spontaneous and deep.

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” May be you’ve heard this expression before. It was written by one of the Church Fathers, Tertullian (197 AD). This sentence does not sadistically justify the suffering of Christians. In fact, Tertullian uses this expression in his Apology that he writes to the Roman Governor defending the Christians. However, he says, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is the seed.”

I think, the high level of indifference to Christianity prevalent in some societies, particularly in the Western societies today, could be seen as a contemporary form of ‘persecution’. In some societies today, it takes a lot of courage to exhibit in public any form of Christian affiliation. Even in these societies, the encouraging surprise is that we often come across individuals who are so deep in their Christian convictions – not just in the externals of the religion but in the true living of the Christian life.

The Liturgy of the Word today suggests: Yes, the Messiah is here! The Lord has visited his people! But it is also that the Lord invites us to a personal encounter with him and to a spontaneous attraction towards him.

In conclusion then, could we say that in the context of the contemporary indifference and even antagonism towards Christian traditions, it is our own personal encounter with Jesus which will make the difference?

In the gospel text we see too that Jesus has crossed the borders from the land of the Jews into what is known as pagan territory to bring the Good News to non-Jews, saying that God wishes to heal and care for all peoples irrespective of religious or other labels. This is an invitation to us to cross the borders to those who do not belong to us socially or religiously, like immigrants, refugees or people of other faiths [e.g. Islam] or indeed those who do not believe at all.

Jesus has gone back to his heavenly Father and he leaves the work of opening the ears of the blind and opening the tongues of the deaf to us. He is not asking us for success stories but rather he asks how we help others to hear by our compassionate listening, by our respectful attitudes. How do we speak to others? Is our manner of speech if in a courteous way not an invitation to others who may be aggressive and angry etc to learn a different way of speaking and addressing others?

Finally Jesus said to the deaf man who had also a speech impediment ‘Ephphatha’ that is ‘Be opened’. Is he not addressing the same words to us? An invitation also to us.

‘Be opened’ – to the goodness of other people, the innocence of babies, the gentleness of the old, the beauties of creation, the knowing smile or people in love, the so many gifts we receive from God daily.

‘Be opened’ to the unspoken cry for friendship of another, to the call of a lonely person living nearby, the call to share what is surplus to me and no longer needed instead of leaving them in my cupboard when I may never use them again.

How can I put into practice the ‘Be opened’ invitation of Jesus today?

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