

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
BE OPENED AND SPEAK UP

“Then looking up to heaven He sighed; and said to him: ‘Ephphatha’, that is ‘Be opened.’ And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened, and he spoke clearly” (Mark 7: 34-35).

The Story of Anthony: As I read through this Gospel, again and again, meditating on the messages that the Word of God has for me and you, I remember Anthony, one of our neighbours, when we were growing up. He was older and used to come around to our house frequently. I can see him in my mind’s eyes how he used to struggle to talk and play with us but couldn’t. I can perceive the indecipherable sounds he would make even very freshly in my ears as I sit here. I also remember that Anthony could neither hear us nor speak to us. Anthony was deaf and dumb! I remember how he used to be shunned and made fun of by people around. He was an object of scorn, mockery, and derision. I remember very regrettably that my little friends and I used to laugh and make fun of him too. May God forgive us. I remember how Anthony would recoil and withdraw from everyone to sit alone and remain in his “silent world.” And no one cared a hoot. I remember very pitifully that not even his siblings were happy to be identified with him because of these impediments. He was always alone in the crowd, unloved and unwanted. So, in sombre reflection, I can, in some ways, identify with the unnamed man in the centre of our story today.

A Call to Love and Empathy: From hindsight, the first challenge here is posed by the people who brought this man to Jesus. Unlike my friends and I, who did not care about the condition of Anthony, these people in the story showed much love and concern to have brought this man “who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech” to Jesus. They didn’t just bring him to Jesus, but “they begged Him to lay His hands upon him” (Mark 7: 32). They demonstrated faith and empathy. What we failed to do for Anthony, the friends in the Gospel did. What about now? God is calling us to be more caring and loving; to be more attentive that there are many people out there that we should bring to His Son, and plead with Him to touch, to forgive, to bless and to heal. There are still many lonely people out there who need our love and presence so that through us, they too, can experience the love and the power of Christ.

Delays For Faith Affirmation: But why did they have to beg Jesus? Why did Jesus hesitate to lay His hands upon him? Remember the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s Gospel (15: 21-28)? Jesus refused initially to attend to her because He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15: 24). Yes, the message and all its corresponding benefits were intended first for the Jews before the Gentiles. Remember Paul in Acts 13: 46: “The Word of God needed to be spoken first to you.” Mark intentionally specifies the location of this miracle to enable us to know that it was in a Gentile region – “by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region.” So, perhaps Jesus’ reaction was for the same reason as the woman in Matthew 15. His action aroused faith and determination on the part of those who brought the man, just as it was

the case of the woman in Matthew's Gospel. Persistence is the fruit of faith. The Word of God has often reminded us to pray persistently and consistently. We have a familiar acronym in PUSH – Pray Until Something Happens. The act of delay by Jesus was to draw faith from the friends than rejection. Sometimes, God delays His answers to elicit faith from within our hearts.

The Call of the Lord of Compassion: The response of Jesus is very compassionate and graphically detailed by Mark. Here was a man afflicted with two serious impediments – he was deaf and dumb like Anthony. Jesus shared in his grief, his isolation, his shamefulness, his lonely world of silence. He perfectly understood the burden of the man standing before Him. And so, Jesus took him away, put His fingers into his ears, spat, touched his tongue, looked up to heaven, sighed and said “Ephphatha” that is “Be opened.” Notice that Jesus took seven significant steps through this miracle of restoration and wholeness. This was a uniquely dramatic demonstration as Jesus carefully acted out every step as if to speak in “sign language” because He knew who He had in front of Him. He took him away from the multitude, from the noisy, lousy crowd to avoid interference and to have a close-up one-on-one contact. How much do we need this silence today to be able to establish this relationship? We need to withdraw from the crowd, from our busy schedules, from the interferences sometimes, so that we can have this close reach with the Lord. Jesus made two direct touches on the man by putting His fingers into the man's ears and touching the man's tongue with His saliva. In ancient days, saliva was known to have powerful therapeutic qualities. Then He looked up to heaven, the throne of His Father, the Source of His power, thus expressing reliance on His Father. Here the humility of Jesus, “Who was God, but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2: 6), is obvious. Then He sighed because He was grieved by the condition of the man, as He continues to grieve for modern man's conditions of deafness that prevents us from hearing the voice of God and the cries of the poor; and dumbness that keeps us silent in the face of unjust laws and inequalities. Jesus spoke the Word: “Ephphatha” – “Be opened” and immediately “his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened, and he spoke clearly” (Mark 7: 35). Today He speaks to us in the very same words: “Be opened” to My invitation, to My love, to My initiatives and plans.

Jesus, The fulfilment of All Prophecies: The effects of the miracle were instantly manifested to the joyful satisfaction of his friends. The crowd was more puzzled. But think about it, what language did he speak? Here was a man who had never heard or spoken any language before? How was it possible for him to speak clearly? “Clearly” here would mean to the understanding of the others. This miracle reveals the identity of Jesus as the Eternal Word Who was God, with, through Whom and for Whom all things were created; the Word Who has taken flesh and dwell among us (John 1: 1-3,14); it reveals His identity as the Messiah. He is the One Who was to come and fulfil the prophecies of old, for example, the prophecies by Isaiah in the First Reading (Isaiah 35: 4-7) – unsealing the ears of the deaf and loosening the tongues of the dumb so they can sing for joy. It must be noted that no other prophet prophesied about the Messiah-like Isaiah – His Birth, His works and miracles, his suffering and death. Jesus would not allow Himself to be identified since His time had not yet come. He warned them not to speak about His works and

miracles – “Messianic Secret.” Nevertheless, such order was difficult to obey in such amazing circumstances. Therefore, the people overtly acknowledged His power: “He has done all things well, He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak” and spoke about it widely and publicly.

My dear friends, this miracle of Jesus, like all other miracles, was not intended to be a “show” to attract attention or followers. They were all tied to His mission of establishing God’s Kingdom for the liberation and salvation of mankind. The “unnamed man” in our story is a metaphor for those lonely, scorned, and ridiculed men and women who are physically challenged in different ways; those beggars we pass by unnoticed. The “unnamed man” represents us too in our deafness and dumbness to the cries of the poor and the needy. The “unnamed man” is the world we live in today that is ravaged by devilish deafness and dumbness that churns out divisions, conflicts, wars, structural injustice, and institutionalised crimes. Today we are called to “Be opened” to Jesus and to bring forth others; to offer our fractured world to Him so that He may open our ears to hear the cries of the immigrants from different of the world where they have been displaced and loosen the ligaments of our tongues so we can speak for the oppressed. Jesus calls us to let our hearts “Be opened” so we all can listen, hear, live out and speak His Word so that there will be healing for us all and the whole world. May his grace be sufficient for us all.