



Things to Ponder

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Homily – Spiritual Deafness – Mark 7:31-37

If we had to give up one of our five senses, probably the last one we would relinquish would be the sense of sight. But Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, considered deafness the far greater handicap. When you can't hear, a lot of doors in the hearing world slam shut. Carrying on a conversation with someone who is very hard of hearing can be frustrating. Listening to the radio? Going to the symphony or opera? Ridiculous. People born deaf also have a great difficulty in learning how to speak since they cannot imitate sounds they cannot hear. Deafness can also place people in grave danger. They can't hear a fire alarm or the engine of an approaching car while crossing the street.

Deafness, unlike blindness or lameness, is not something that people immediately notice. Some less compassionate people may find deaf people to be a nuisance. We are more sympathetic with the blind and lame because their infirmity is immediately apparent. But we can easily get irritated and annoyed with people who cannot hear. As a result, deaf people are apt to avoid company and get more and more shut in, feeling lonely and abandoned.

The deaf man in today's Gospel experienced the same kind of reactions and consequences that deaf people experience to this day, but to an even more serious degree. Physical ailments were often seen as a punishment for some serious sin, and so the deaf man was "unclean" and thus shunned by other people in the village. Moreover, he was a Gentile, a person whom the Jews considered to be beneath them.

Why does Jesus choose to cure this particular man? Several reasons come to mind. Isaiah tells us today that one sign of the true Messiah would be the person who will open the ears of the deaf, and loosen the tongues of the mute. By curing the deaf man and enabling him to speak, Jesus wants to reveal that the long-awaited Messiah has now come. By curing a Gentile, Jesus shows that He is the Messiah of everyone, and not just the Jews.

A second reason, and certainly the motivating reason for Jesus, is His compassion for the plight of the deaf man. He does not act like a modern-day televangelist who calls the sick to come forward, stand before everyone and be made a spectacle of. Notice how Jesus, sensing the man's aversion to attracting attention to himself, draws him away from the crowd for a one-on-one encounter, so close that Jesus can touch his ears and his tongue. The first words the man hears are the words of his cure,

Ephphatha, that is, "Be opened!"

And a third reason? Perhaps to remind the crowd, and ourselves that, although we may have perfect hearing, we can all too easily close our ears to the Lord's words and precepts. We may have tongues that need to be loosened for more frequent and fruitful prayer, and express kinder words to others. Recall the words the priest said at your baptism: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim the praise and glory of God the Father."

Let's admit it: we all suffer some degree of spiritual deafness, and the consequences are not unlike those of physical deafness: we feel cutoff from the Lord and others too. We turn inward and feel lonely. We become oblivious to the dangers to our faith that surround us in such a secular society as our own. We feel stressed out. We have difficulty in dealing with others--all because we remain deaf to His word that comes to us in prayer and we remain mute in our praise and thanksgiving to God for all of our blessings.

The Lord worked no mass miracles in His earthly life; He always worked one-on-one. He waited until a person asked for a cure, or for others to make the request on that person's behalf. Today we have a one-on-one encounter with the Lord as we receive His real presence in the Eucharist. May He continue to open our ears to the power of His word, and our mouths to proclaim His praise, for only when we leave ourselves open to His word in prayer and reading the scriptures, can we become the people He has willed us to be and be used as His instruments in bringing that healing Christ to one another.

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