

Homily for the Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (5th September 2009)

In the gospel stories we hear about the group of people that Jesus chooses to be close to him. We hear about how he calls them, how they follow him, and we hear various stories about what they say and do. In some cases, it is even possible to see how they change over time. But there are also lots of stories of people who meet Jesus only briefly. Their paths cross his for a few moments, and then they move on. We do not know anything about their lives before they meet him, not do we know what happens to them later. The man that Jesus meets today is one such person. His friends bring him to Jesus, and he is blind and unable to speak, but that is all we know; we do not even know his name. There is, however, something incredibly powerful about their meeting. First of all, there is the faith of this man's friends. They believe that Jesus can do something; they believe that it is worth making the effort to bring their friend to him, and they care about this unnamed man enough to do this. Then there is Jesus' reaction. He takes the man aside in private, so that the crowd cannot see or hear what is going to happen. This is not some kind of freak show, or a magic trick; Jesus is not doing this to impress the crowds, he wants to have a one to one encounter with the man. This was not a planned meeting, but whatever Jesus was doing he lays aside so that he can give this man his full attention.

Before restoring this man's hearing and speech, Jesus touches his ears and his tongue. We know from other miracles that Jesus doesn't need to do this, he could have healed the man without these gestures, but all the same Jesus touches him. This is not healing at a distance, it is a very clear indication that in Christ God reaches out to break down the distance, to break down all the barriers, and to touch this man. This touch is compassion made into actions, it is love made concrete. The man, whose name we do not know, will not go away saying "Jesus spoke and I was healed" but "Jesus touched me and healed me". On a physical level the result is just the same, but in the man's mind this way is far more powerful.

This healing story finds its way into what looks like a rather unexpected part of our Catholic liturgy. After a child has been baptised, once it has been clothed in white and

given a lighted candle, the priest touches the child's ears and mouth, saying "*The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to hear his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father*". Based on today's gospel reading, this prayer is known as the Ephphatha. The healing of this unknown man clearly has something to say about baptism, and because baptism is the starting point of every Christian life you could say that this story therefore has something to say about the life of every single Christian. At the beginning of a person's life of faith, long before they are able to understand what is going on, the Church's prayer is that their ears may be opened, and their mouth may be opened; not simply opened for their own purposes, but opened to hear God's word, and to sing his praise. The fact that this prayer is said at every baptism means that there is something about this that is fundamental to being a Christian. This is not just a pious hope, this is something essential. One of the marks of the Christian is that he or she is open to hearing God's word, and to speaking his praises.

No wonder the people, when they realise what has happened, are full of admiration and say "He has done all things well". He has not just healed this man, he has quite literally opened up his life; seeing this, the lives of the other people in the crowd are also opened up. This is God's will for all of us as we hear this story. As we listen to the scriptures, often our eyes glaze over and our hearing is dulled. We have heard this story before, we know how it ends, we know what it means (or we think we do), it is all so familiar. A kind of plug of familiarity and habit has blocked our ears. We need an experience such as today's gospel that will break open our ears, and enable us to hear the scriptures as something living and active, something which, even if we have read it a hundred times before, still has the power to speak to us freshly. We need to be able to listen to the scriptures in a new way. We need to have not just our ears, but our minds opened. We need to sit alert and eager with anticipation as the scriptures are read to us, or as we take up our Bible, so that we hear each reading as if it were being read for the first time. This should be our prayer really, 'Lord let me hear this reading as if I were hearing it for the first time'. We need to really believe that it might have something new to say to us. As long as we are expecting just to hear something familiar, something we know, something we think we know all about, that is all we will get; but if we really expect that it may speak to us in a new way, if we are genuinely open to being challenged, to

hearing something new, maybe even something disturbing, then our ears will truly have been opened.

This is why the crowd says 'he has done all things well', it is because Jesus has brought to life something they thought was familiar. The prophet Isaiah said that the Messiah would unseal the ears of the deaf and loosen the tongue of the dumb, and people thought they knew what that meant. But today the words they have heard come alive. Jesus brings the scriptures to life, and as he brings the scriptures to life he also brings to life the people he meets. Today's gospel story challenges us to be open to the scriptures, open to the Lord. Will we dare be open enough to read and hear the scriptures with an openness that lets them shake us up, that disturbs us, that may even make us rethink radically how we live our lives? Are we happy to be closed within what is familiar, what is comfortable, what we think we know and understand, or are we willing to let ourselves be opened up by the Lord? Do we want our ears to be opened?