

**Ephphetha**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Mk 7:31-37)**

St. Mark wrote his Gospel in Greek, the common language of the Gentile world in the time of the apostles. But in this passage – as he did earlier when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:41) – he records the original Aramaic word which Jesus spoke when he healed the deaf-mute man: “*Ephphetha*,” “be opened!”

Mark says Jesus groaned deeply, from the depth of his spirit, when he spoke this word. He also tells us how Jesus put his finger into the man’s ear and touched his tongue, using his own spittle. In the beginning, God spoke and the world was made, and God formed man from the clay of the ground, putting his own breath, His own Spirit, into the clay so that man would be a living being (Gn 2:7). It was by his “fingers” that God made the world, the heavens, and everything in it (Ps 8:3)

Jesus is God the Son, the one through whom the Father first made man, and now Jesus puts his finger into the man’s ear to reform the clay, and puts his own life into the man so that he will live, and hear, and speak. Jesus performed the same type of miracle when he healed the man born blind (Jn 9:6). This is also the same thing Jesus said he would accomplish through the Eucharist: unite himself with us, even on the physical level, so that we would have in our flesh his Flesh, and in our blood his own divine Life.

Jesus continues to speak this word, “*Ephphetha*,” in the Church every time we receive his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. But the “*Ephphetha*” is also one of the formal rituals in the Liturgy of Baptism. At the very end of the celebration, after the anointing and white garment and candle, the minister traces the sign of the cross over the child’s ears and lips saying, “*The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he touch your ears to receive his word and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.*”

In Baptism, God re-forms us, re-creates us as a new man, possessing divine life. Our nature is regenerated. And one of the special graces we attain as Christians, through Baptism, is the grace to hear and speak God’s word.

This is not something automatic, and not something we can accomplish by natural human power. God’s language and God’s word are above us, and it takes a gift of grace from the Holy Spirit to enable these ears to hear it. Without that grace we remain deaf. But this is what our Christian life accomplishes.

When infants are born they are blessed by nature with hearing and speech, but they can pretty much just cry or scream. It takes time for them to learn the language of their parents and speak it in return. If for some reason they have a hearing impairment, this process will take a long time, or maybe never happen.

In a similar way, following our rebirth in Baptism as Christian infants, we need to grow in the new baptismal grace of spiritual hearing, and not allow any impediments to prevent us from learning and speaking the language of God easily, understanding and proclaiming His word.

Unfortunately, many Catholics, though they are baptized, remain spiritually deaf, or at least hard of hearing, all their lives. How many are able to hear and converse with God the way Moses did, or Elijah, John the Baptist, the Blessed Mother, and the saints throughout history? This is not acceptable. “Ephphetha!” Jesus gives the grace and challenges us to hear, to really listen. How often would Jesus repeat, after teaching a parable, “*Let him who has ears to hear, hear!*”

There are so many ways we can fail to hear, even though God is speaking. The world can literally drown Him out. Elijah didn’t hear God in the great fire and earthquake, but in the gentlest breeze (1K 19:11-13). If we never have silence in our lives – true silent prayer where we can listen to the subtle voice of the Spirit, we will never hear God. So even though we may be baptized, it is possible to be deafened by the world, which ensures that God’s voice is effectively drowned out.

We can also fail to hear because we are weak, or tired, and easily distracted. We can come to Mass burdened and occupied, and as a result the readings go “in one ear and out the other.” It takes effort to concentrate. It also takes preparation, such as reviewing the readings beforehand.

It is also essential to take up study. Just as a little child has to go to school in order to fully learn his language and its grammar and vocabulary in order to communicate well, we have to study God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures, the doctrine of the faith, in order to know its language and vocabulary, so that we can better know God, pray to Him, and hear His will in our lives.

A beautiful little prayer to renew the grace of the baptismal “Ephphetha” is the one we recite silently before the Gospel is proclaimed: “*May the words of the Gospel be ✕ in my mind, ✕ on my lips, and ✕ in my heart.*” We are saying a prayer to open our ears, so that we don’t just listen to a bunch of sounds being spoken, but so that we really *hear* them with our hearts, and hear the voice of Jesus who speaks them. The words of the Lord in the Gospel must not simply be heard with our ears, but must go into our mind and hearts, in order to affect and influence what we then express in our words and actions.

From hearing comes speaking. If we do not hear God, it’s no surprise that we also don’t proclaim Him. We also need Jesus to touch our tongue and open our lips.

St. Peter says, “*Always be prepared to give to others a reason for the hope that is within you, doing it with gentleness and respect*” (1 P 3:15). When we are questioned or challenged in our faith, how many Catholics are mute in their ability to respond, or more accurately, *dumb*.

Even worse than the inability to speak God’s word due to insecurity, shyness, lack of preparation, or insufficient knowledge, is when by bad example and hypocrisy we *contradict* that word. To speak and proclaim the truth of the Gospel, we must live those truths with purity of heart. And for many Christians, that living example *is* the eloquent proclamation. St. Francis urged his brothers to “Preach the Gospel wholeheartedly, and say a few words if necessary.” And Jesus quoted Psalm 8 to remind us the proclamation of the Gospel doesn’t have to be sophisticated, only humble and sincere: “*Out of the mouths of babies and infants you have found perfect praise*” (Ps 8:2, Mt 21:16).

It took great effort on the part of Jesus to open the man’s ears and enable him to speak. For us too, it takes a big miracle to open our hearts so that we may hear and understand the word of God, and proclaim it genuinely. The people were astonished when they saw this miracle of Jesus. “*He has done all things well.*”

I think people would be astonished today too, if they saw that miracle happen here. If these Catholics really heard and listened to God’s word, and then turned around and started speaking it with their lips and with their lives, people would be astonished. They would wonder what had taken place there. Imagine how different this parish would be if we weren’t all deaf, and mute!