

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Ephphatha Be Opened”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, this Gospel reading comes at a good time for me. One of the basic things we know about Jesus from the Gospels is that he was a healer. He performed miracles throughout his ministry and miracles still happen today in the life of the Church. I know, I have seen them. It is a simple thing we can do along our spiritual journey, when it gets right down to it, to simply lift up whatever is hurting in our soul to Jesus and ask for his healing. And so, let's talk about miracles in the life of the Church. Why does Jesus perform healings anyway? What is his motivation? I think this question comes at a good time because we have been through a lot these past couple years, and just under the surface for so many of us is a measure of hurt. At times, we all find ourselves desperate for a miracle.

Like I said, I have seen miracles happen, both physically and spiritually. I have seen enough in my priesthood to be able to say the miracles recorded by the Gospels happened and they continue to happen today. What is really important however is to understand that Jesus doesn't perform supernatural healing for healing sake alone, never has. Jesus' miracles always have a deeper spiritual relevance that points to the Kingdom of God. For example, was there really a man who was deaf with a speech impediment who was cured by Jesus like we have in our Gospel reading this weekend? Yes. It really happened. But now, let us look at the deeper significance of this miracle.

I like Bishop Robert Barron's take on this Gospel reading from Mark. The Gospel story begins with Jesus coming back to his home country. For St. Mark, Jesus is the Christ who will gather the tribes of Israel. Jesus is the good shepherd gathering the lost sheep. The miracle then demonstrates Jesus as the gatherer of Israel by taking this deaf-mute man who symbolizes Israel and addresses the problem.

You see, in the bible, the people of Israel are the ones privileged to hear the Word of God. Think of all the great figures in the bible who were hearers of the Word: Abraham, Noah, Moses, and all the patriarchs and prophets. Now look how difficult it was at times for them to hear the Word of God. Elijah had to strain his ears to hear the tiny little voice in the silence of a mountainside. Samuel heard the Word of God while he is asleep but wasn't quite sure at first who it was who was calling him. He needed Eli to help him discern the voice of God. John the Baptist had to go into the quiet of the desert before he could hear the Word of God. Saul on the way to Damascus had to be knocked to the ground before he could hear the Word of God.

And so, we now have the basic problem. Are there great figures in the bible who hear the Word of God? Yes! But here is the rub. Is Israel often deaf to the Word of God? Yes! Israel in the bible is often listening to other gods, the false gods of their neighbors or the voice of popular culture. Sometimes Israel simply closes their ears because the Word of God is too challenging. God speaks but they don't listen. My friends, what happens if we can't hear, what follows? Well, speech becomes compromised. Israel, by closing their

ears to the Word of God, is no longer able to speak effectively or convincingly. Israel becomes a deaf-mute. Israel needs God's healing.

Now watch carefully the details of this miracle of the healing of the deaf-mute. There are three moments we must not overlook. First, the Gospel says Jesus began by taking the deaf-mute away from the crowd. This is important. What makes Israel deaf? Israel is lost in the loudness of worldly concerns. Israel must get away from the crowd so that they can hear the Word of God again, and so do we at times, right?

What happens next? Jesus touches the man's ears. Jesus spits and touches his tongue and says "ephphatha...Be opened!" Now, to our ears, that image sounds a little gross. However, for St. Augustine, the spittle of Jesus is evocative of his inner nature, his divinity. Israel needs to be touched by God's inner nature so to hear his voice and proclaim it once more. Bishop Barron says that this awesome moment of Jesus touching the deaf mute is evocative of the beautiful painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. God reaches out from heaven to touch Adam. There is an electricity of touch. Jesus touches the deaf mute to reestablish a link to the divine.

Finally, who is the new Israel, commissioned to hear and speak the Word of God? For St. Mark, the new Israel is the Church, the Body of Christ. We are the deaf-mute. We are the ones who are all too often deaf to the Word of God. We are the ones who all too often cannot effectively speak God's Word to others. We are the ones called to be the new Israel through Jesus' healing touch. That is our vocation. We are the special people who are called to hear and then speak effectively God's Word. Like I said, this Gospel reading comes at a good time for me.

My friends, what do we need to do to hear and proclaim God's Word in the times in which we live? What is the remedy to the hurt we feel as we enter into another fall with Covid 19? The invitation Jesus seems to be offering is to begin by getting away from the crowd. Every so often, we simply need to close our laptops and turn off our phones. We need to spend some more time each day with Jesus so he can touch our mouth and whisper into our ears. Only then, can we effectively speak God's Word to others.

Do we dare? Do we dare to take time each day to be away from the noise and be reconnected to Jesus? I say this because sometimes the best healing Jesus can offer us isn't a supernatural display but rather what happens naturally when we welcome him really and truly into our hearts. Whatever healing we seek from Jesus this week, turn to him. Just turn to him. When we turn to Jesus, he will heal us in the way he knows we need it most and we might just be surprised by a miracle in our own lives as he whispers into our ears, "Ephphatha! Be open!"