

Homily 23B: 9 Sept 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

Last Sun there was a Baptism @ the 10:30 Mass. One of the post-baptismal rituals is the Ephphatha, where the minister touches the newly baptized on the ears and tongue and blesses him: May the Lord touch your ears to receive his word and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father. The idea driving this baptismal blessing is that as the child matures he will listen attentively to the gospel and believe it and proclaim it to others. The gospel today where the Lord heals the man who is deaf and mute is the inspiration for this action. As is typical, the physical cures worked by Jesus symbolize a spiritual cure that is his ulterior goal. He's trying to open people's spiritual ears, that is, their hearts, to receive the gospel. As is often the case in Mark's account, a kind of subtle irony follows in the next chapter where the Lord's disciples fail to understand what he is trying to teach them. At one point Jesus exclaims to them in frustration, "Having ears do you not hear!"

One of the perennial tragedies of the Church is that so many people have ears to hear the Gospel, but just don't get it. People come to Mass week in and week out, hear the Scriptures, recite the prayers, and yet the lessons don't sink in at all. I don't mean hypocrisy, where folks know what the Gospel teaches but fail to live in accord with it. Our problem is more profound. I mean that a lot of Catholics who have been coming to church for decades don't even know their religious ABCs, the most basic doctrines of the Catholic faith. There seems to be a kind of widespread spiritual deafness. And this is a huge problem, because this spiritual hearing impairment initiates a vicious cycle with catastrophic results. It is commonly known that the senses of hearing and speech are tightly related. Children who have hearing impairments often suffer speech impediments as well. It's like the man in the Gospel, Jesus had to heal his ears and his tongue. As it is in the physical realm, so also in the religious realm. People who aren't hearing the gospel message are not able to share it with others. For example, priests who aren't taking time to meditate on God's Word can't proclaim it from the pulpit. Parents who don't hear the gospel can't share it with their children. And so the gospel gradually fades from the collective consciousness.

Now our Church is trying to remedy this loss of spiritual hearing in many ways. At the global level, Pope Benedict has declared this upcoming year to be a Year of Faith, when the universal Church will try to open the ears of her children and of the world to the good news of salvation. Here at the local level we begin our Parish School of Religion for children this weekend. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of our DREs and teachers, children receive basic instruction in the Catholic faith up into high school, after which they can learn even more in Confirmation prep and Youth Ministry classes. Yet we know that these weekly offerings can do no more than reinforce the lessons being taught at home; if parents aren't laying the foundation for what's taught in the parochial program, the lessons of Sunday School will quickly fade away. To help parents for their sake and their children's sake, we offer a number of faith formation opportunities for adults. There are adult education courses where adult Catholics learn in an

adult friendly format about the central teachings of their faith. There are audio CDs available from the Lighthouse stand. And I'm happy to help folks who have specific questions as well.

Finally, there is a kind of intentional deafness among a lot of folks in our corner of the world. I mean there are many folks in the world today, esp. our part of the world, who simply have become deaf to the gospel. They don't go to church, they don't believe what the Bible says. Maybe that's conscious choice, maybe it's just a consequence of not making time for God, maybe they have never even heard of the gospel. Often you can plead and argue with these folks until you're blue in the face and it won't do any good at all. They require divine intervention, a kind of miracle, an Ephphatha moment when their hearts are opened to the good news of Jesus Christ. I encourage everyone to pray, esp. during this Year of Faith that starts next month, to pray specifically for the conversion of unbelievers. Let's ask our God to open hearts to hear the gospel, and also ask him to transform us so that we'll be better witnesses of the gospel in word and deed.