

PRAYER OF THE DAY (The Fourth Week of Lent)

God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

HOLY GOSPEL.....Mark 7:31-37, KJV

And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. ³²And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. ³³And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; ³⁴And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. ³⁵And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. ³⁶And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; ³⁷And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.

LBW 426

O Son of God, in Galilee

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁶And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; ³⁷And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.(Mark 7:36-37, KJV)

And so it is that the mighty judgment of our Maker from long, long ago receives its proper echo on earth. In the beginning, when the LORD made heaven and earth, after each day's labor, our Maker would consider what he had made and he would judge it to be good. There is a rhythm to the days of creation. They end in the Lord's judgment that that day's work had been good. And then, at the end of the sixth day, when his work was done, including the creation of us humans, then we hear that wonderful adverb "very":

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was *very* good.
And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.(Genesis 1:31, KJV)

Now, in the summary statement at the end of this evening's Gospel story, we hear humanity's answer in reply:

And [they] were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well...

The joy of this evening's story is that now the poor deaf and dumb man is able to join the earthly chorus of praise of our Maker: He hath done all things well! Before this night's story, he could do no such thing — at least he could not do it well — for he was deaf and dumb.

Our text says that the man “was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech.” The one might have led to the other. Not being able to hear, his speech might have been troubled too. In fact, his sounds might have been incomprehensible to those listening. Or maybe, the man stammered. Not only could he not hear, but if he had once heard and understood language, still he is prevented from speaking by his speech defect. The *King James Version* suggests this when it reports the good news of the man's healing:

³⁵And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.

To a preacher like me, or to anyone who makes his living by talking, this man's plight prior to Jesus is especially pitiable. How is the man going to engage in conversation if he cannot hear? He might have a lifetime of experience behind him, and he might have been graced with clarity of mind and rich insight, but he cannot share it with anyone because he neither hears nor speaks. And suppose he somehow learns to read lips or to read brail, still he cannot easily or naturally answer back. Why, he stammers even when trying to talk to his little daughter. How can he be leader of his village, or of the synagogue? How can he share what life has taught him with the teenagers in the village? How can he conduct business and put food on the table for his loved ones?

But Jesus has come along, and that makes all the difference. Jesus takes him aside, perhaps to a garden, to some place apart where they can have privacy. Jesus mimes what he means to do for the man. He places his fingers in the man's ears. He touches the man's tongue. With his touch he indicates the places of healing.

Then Jesus commands that there shall be healing: Ephphatha! Be opened. And sure enough, the man's senses were opened. His ears were opened and his tongue released, and the man was freed to enter into human conversation as a free and full participant. Even lepers could talk with another, while this man had been unable to talk freely with anyone. Now he can, and this was surely an extraordinary blessing in his life.

There shall come a time in the life of Jesus when the world will say to his ears: stop hearing. And to his sweet tongue: stop preaching! And to his very heartbeat: stop your beating! And then they shall put him a tomb and roll and stone in front and they shall imagine the case of Jesus to be closed.

But God the Father and God the Spirit shall command, as Jesus commands in this evening's story: Ephphatha! And everything shall be opened. The tomb shall be opened, for the angel shall roll away that rock and simply rest on it. The eyes of Jesus, his ears, and his tongue shall be opened and released. And the hope of heaven shall be opened to you and to me and to anyone in this world who desires it.

For you and me on this side of heaven, in this earthly battleground and in this church militant, we are at our best when we permit ourselves to become soft-hearted. I do not mean soft-minded, but soft-hearted. That is, we are at our best when we open ourselves up to Jesus. We do not resist him and close ourselves to him, but open it and because Ephphatha people, then we begin our best path — the path of discipleship behind Him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.