In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the heart of our Gospel reading for this morning is a word that can, according to Pope Benedict XVI, summarize the whole mission and work of Jesus.¹ The Evangelist writes it in the same language that Jesus spoke it in so that we can hear the same syllables, the very same sounds that Jesus himself uttered. This word is “Ephphatha,” which means, “be opened.”

Jesus said this word as he was between the region of Tyre and the Sea of Galilee, which is a predominantly Gentile region. While Jesus was there, they brought to him a man who was both deaf and mute. We do not know who it was that brought the man, they are only given a pronoun in the story. But whomever “they” were, they knew enough about this Jesus from Israel, to know that he could help this deaf and mute man. Then Jesus took this man aside, he put his fingers into the deaf man’s ears, touched his tongue, looked up to heaven, gave a deep sigh, and said, “Ephphatha,” “be opened.” And the man’s ears were opened, and he spoke plainly, he spoke as if there had never been any problems with his speech at all.

Because of what Jesus did for this man, his life was opened up to new and grander possibilities. Before, his life had been closed-off, isolated. For this man, communication would have been at best very difficult. Healing, for this man, meant that he was opened to relate and speak in utterly new ways. He had never before heard the words, “I love you”; never before had these words been on his lips. His whole life and person were changed by this word from Christ Jesus, “Ephphatha, be opened.”

But Jesus did not come just to restore physical hearing and speech. He did come to restore and to heal whatever plagues the bodies of humankind. But he also came to undo that great enemy of the body: death. And to destroy death, to truly give to humankind fullness of bodily life, Jesus had to do more than heal deafness and muteness. And in this, the church has often seen Jesus’ healings and miracles as showing something more than just the obvious physical healing.

¹ The Angelus message for September 9, 2012, by Pope Benedict XVI.
But I want to be clear, it isn’t the case that Jesus does not care about physical ailments such as being deaf or mute, or we might add any other disease or physical and bodily evil such as cancer or MS or even the common cold. He does care. But these are symptoms of a disease. The disease is sin, estrangement from God, the inability to love God and receive his love like we were created to do. Jesus came to cure the disease, not just the symptoms. And in all of his healings, we are given a sign that he is going to deal not just with the symptoms of the disease, but the disease itself. Jesus is coming to heal all bodily diseases and evils, but to do that he will cure the disease, to restore us to right relationship with his Father. To restore us to right relationship with his Father, he is going to make our very bodies vessels of God’s love: bodies able to receive and return God’s love.

Precisely in the curing of the symptom, we are given insight into how Christ Jesus is going to cure the disease.

So then we see in the deaf and mute man an image of all that ails humanity fallen into sin, of what it means for us to be estranged from God. What we see in this man, is that humankind separated from God is spiritually deaf and spiritually mute.

As much as being physically deaf and mute can isolate a person, can cause us to be closed off from our neighbors and perhaps even from God; as much as being physically deaf and mute might insulate one from God’s purposes, how much more does being spiritually deaf and spiritually mute isolate and close off someone? There is a “closure of man,” to use Pope Benedict’s excellent phrase, an isolation of humankind, that is far deeper than the ears or the tongue. There is a deep-seated closure or isolation that is at the core of one’s being, at what Scripture calls the heart. It is the heart that is deaf and mute, it is the heart that is closed off to God’s love. Above all, this is what Jesus came to open; above all it is our hearts to which Jesus desires to speak “Ephphatha.” When Jesus speaks “Ephphatha” to our hearts, when Jesus opens up the heart, he is curing the disease itself.

What does it mean to have a deaf and mute heart? It is similar to the warning that God gave to Adam and Eve while they yet walked together in the Garden. God said to Adam and Eve, “Of every tree you shall eat, but do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For on the day you eat of it you shall surely die.” Well, of that tree Adam and Eve did partake, but they did not immediately die. According to Genesis, Adam lived to be over nine hundred years old. So if he lived for many years after eating, how did Adam and Eve

2 Ibid.
die that day, as God had said? Adam and Eve did not physically die the day that they ate of the tree, but they did die *spiritually*. Adam and Eve died in relation to God, their relationship with God died. The communion and fellowship that they had with the Lord was broken. To be separated from God, to be estranged from the one who breathed life into you, is to already be dead.

But God might have also said to Adam and Eve, “on the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall surely become deaf.” After Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord by eating the forbidden fruit, Genesis says, “they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:7). They *heard* the Lord. Their deafness was not physical. But what was their response when they heard the Lord? “The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God” (3:8).

It was the heart that had changed, and they could no longer hear the Word of God as it most deeply is: a Word of love, as God’s own voice of love. To have a deaf heart is to not be able to respond to the Word of God with anything but hiding, with anything but turning away from the Lord in either fear or unbelief or both. Spiritually deaf humanity is unable to hear the Word of God as a *saving* Word.

But when Jesus opens up the heart of a person, when the one who is rendered inwardly deaf is opened up by the Lord, then God’s voice can be heard once again as a word of love, a word of love that when heard so shapes the heart that the heart begins to love in the same way. And therefore, the tongue too is loosened, opened up. And the one whose heart has been opened up by the Lord, the one who is able to hear the word of the Lord as a word of love, begins to speak with this same love.

And in love, the tongue will be loosened to confess what is good and what is lovely and what is true. Unlike Adam who blamed Eve when he was asked about having eaten of the tree, and unlike Eve who blamed the serpent when she was asked, the tongue of the one opened up by the Lord can say in full faith and with full heart, “I confess that I have sinned in thought, word and deed, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone.”

But what is *most* good and lovely and true, or rather, what is *alone* good and lovely and true, is our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And if the tongue is going to be truly loosened from a truly opened up heart, the speech that will pour forth will be the praises of the one who is alone Good and Lovely and True. When Jesus speaks “Ephphatha” to us, our response is nothing but the deaf and mute man’s, to speak, to speak fluently, to speak as with a native
tongue the praises and adoration of our Lord. For when Jesus opens up our
tongue to speak, it is his own words that he gives, his own words of love and
praise for his Father.

Whenever the Word of the Lord comes to us, wherever we encounter God’s
Word, it is Jesus Christ himself who comes, and seeks to open up our ears just
as he did for the deaf-mute man, so that the Word of Love may come to dwell
in us, and give us a new heart.

This is why, in the liturgy of Holy Baptism, the baptizer makes the sign of the
cross over the ears and the mouth of the one to be baptized. This used to be
called the Ephphatha rite, and the one baptizing would at the same time as
crossing the ears and mouth say the words “Ephphatha,” be opened. This was
done to explain what is taking place in the waters of Holy Baptism. In
Baptism Jesus does for us what he did for the deaf-mute man: he opens us up
to hear his word and to speak his praises by giving us a new heart, by giving
us his own heart.

And whenever we hear the Word of God, Jesus is again saying to us,
“Ephphatha,” “be opened.” Whether that is on the lips of our neighbor or on
the lips of the preacher or the lector, Christ is calling us to be opened. Be
opened to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Be opened to the work of God in
this world; be opened so that your faith might work in love. Above all, Jesus
says to us, “be opened to me, be opened to the love that I have for you.” This
is, I think, why the Evangelist Mark has kept Jesus’ own word here in this
passage. Everything else that Jesus said in our passage was written down in
Greek, which Jesus and the disciples did not speak to one another, but this
word was written down in his own native tongue. It is as if the Evangelist
Mark were saying, “make no mistake, it is Jesus himself who is calling you to
be opened up, and it is he himself who will accomplish this in you.”

And Jesus calls us now, to be opened to his word, to hear his word as the voice
of God himself, and to come and receive this word in bread and cup, to have
our hearts renewed in faith and our tongues unloosed to be able to speak of
his love and to sing his praises, the praises of ...

Our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs all glory and honor
and praise, now and forever. Amen.