

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 23rd. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
SEPTEMBER 7, 2003

Isaiah 35:4-7a Psalm 146 James 2: 1-5 Mark 7: 31-37

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

As a teenager I had a deaf friend. John could make sounds but could not speak. He had been born deaf and since he had never heard sounds he had great difficulty pronouncing words and inflecting his voice in a conversational way. For example, he had never heard how the inflection at the end of a question sounded, so his questions were like ordinary statements of fact. We learned rudimentary sign language so we could "talk" with him. But communication was limited and our infantile sign language barely got facts across to him, much less the subtleties of feelings and abstract language. We could say, "Rain today," and add a question mark. But we struggled to say, "It might rain today," or statements that were more emotionally involved like, "My grandfather is close to death, and I feel a sad."

No wonder the scriptures use the capacity to hear, see and speak in symbolic ways to address different aspects of faith. When the prophet Isaiah promises God's coming to open the eyes of the blind or the ears of the deaf, he is speaking of more than physical signs of God's arrival. Of course, those in need will have to experience in concrete ways God's care for them; God's desire to free them from whatever holds them in bondage. (Notice too that not only humans will benefit from God's anticipated arrival; creation will also be made whole. The dry and drought-stricken land will receive "springs of water.") Being cured of blindness, having deaf ears opened and lame limbs empowered certainly gets one's attention! Both the cured and the spectators should draw the logical conclusions: "Something special is happening; something not attributable to mere human efforts." So, the people who saw Jesus cure the deaf man knew God was acting on their behalf. The miracle takes place in gentile territory, among those considered "dogs" by devout Jews. God's reaching-out through Jesus is an embrace of all people in need, all who need to see by a guiding light and hear a voice of acceptance. God, as Isaiah anticipated, is making "the deaf hear and the mute speak."

This miracle is unique to Mark and has distinctive Marcan touches. (Our interpretation is helped by paying attention to how a gospel writer tells a story and what he adds or subtracts from what the other evangelists narrate.) Mark typically

describes Jesus' physical acts when performing a miracle. In this one Jesus puts "his finger in the man's ear and, spitting, touched his tongue; he looked up to heaven and groaned...." This is a vivid scene, worthy of a tv program. The viewer would probably ask, "What's going on here? Who is this man and what does all this mean?" Which is what Mark hopes we will ask.

So we look for some meaning and application of this story to our lives. Besides the physical cure and delight the man who was cured must have felt, what is the meaning of this miracle? Well, let's first ask, "What would Jesus' contemporaries have observed or learned from this miracle?" In Jesus' day sickness or physical affliction was associated with sin. So, people would have reasoned that the man's deafness was punishment for some sin he, or even his parents, committed. If Jesus could cure the man, they would have reasoned, God must also have released him from whatever sins he committed that caused the illness.

Isaiah had promised just such a rescue. God would "save you." The physical manifestations of giving sight to the blind, speech to the mute and mobility to the lame would mean, according to the prophet, that God was releasing people from their afflictions and any acts that had severed their relationship with God. Even the suffering earth would be liberated and all would be able to live in harmony and right relationship with one another. No wonder people looked forward to the coming messianic times! No wonder the Isaiah reading is so up-beat; marked, as it is, with joy and anticipation.

The early church looked at Jesus' cure of the deaf man and the other miracles, as a sign that God's promises were fulfilled in Jesus. His cure of the diseased and distressed were also signs that the presumed links between sickness and sin were broken. People could no longer deduce that a sick person was a sinner under punishment from God. Indeed, the sick became the special instruments of God's saving works; in their cures people would experience God up-close to humans in their needs—God working for, not against us. The gospels show us that the poor and sick are the very places God visits the earth and works wonders. Those formerly treated as outcasts and regarded as sinners are now, in other words, sanctuaries of God's presence on earth.

No wonder then that James speaks so strongly in our second reading against prejudice towards the less fortunate. Jesus' miracles have symbolic value and reveal a deeper meaning for us. Just as Jesus opened the eyes of the blind to see

physical light and the ears of the deaf to hear physical sound, so has his healing power opened our inner eyes to see by the light of faith and our inner ears to hear the gospel message. With James then, we know that, though the exterior situation of a person may be less acceptable according to societal standards, nevertheless, it is in those who are "poor in the world" that God is specially present.

Followers of Jesus, James is saying, need to see and hear in a new way. We hear by faith and are directed by that faith to act differently in the world. So, to treat those who are wealthy better than we treat the poor, would be a return to having no faith, to be like those whose eyes and ears have not been opened. The way a person dresses or speaks; the amount they own; their level on the professional ladder; their physical attributes; their family or nation of origin; their political status, etc., should not be the way we "see and hear" them. The baptismal rite used to include the touching of the baptized person's ears and the declaration, "'Ephphatha!'"—"Be opened!" Baptism started that process of enabling our ears and eyes to hear and see with faith.

James wants Christians to remember that God has opened our ears and eyes--- favored us with faith. Isaiah also predicts that the time would come when the lame would "leap." Seeing these healing signs as symbolically applying to all of us requires that we stop acting like cripples waiting for the world to come to us. We need to "leap like a stag" to the needs of others. Our tongues must also be loosed to speak on behalf of those who have no rights or effective voice in our society.

"Ephphatha!" "Be opened!" We all need to keep hearing these words. We need to have our hearts and minds opened to those we might normally shut out of our consciousness and company. "Be opened!"is the commanding voice we encounter in today's liturgical celebration. It isn't just a directive, an order, to get our act together. It is a reminder that baptism has opened our ears and eyes to new ways of perceiving and responding to others. As we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" in the gospel today, we are also given a "booster shot"—the healing medicine brought us in baptism is energized, is re-kindled, to enable it to have its beneficial effects on our lives.

Jesus "Ephphatha!" is also advisory, like the weather forecasters warnings of approaching bad weather. "Ephphatha!" warns us about all that would close down what baptism has opened up. Voices contrary to our baptismal faith make up the background noise of daily life: voices of family prejudices; misplaced societal

values; rumors of enemies and war; stereotypical images of whole races, religions and genders; voices of chauvinistic nationalism; voices of envy, and competition; voices that cheer for victory and success at any price. And on and on—these voices try to shout over the inner voice of the Spirit that began speaking to us at our baptisms.

We receive Jesus' powerful "Ephphatha!" today and pray for good hearing, clear-eyed vision and a readiness to "leap" in when Christians are needed on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised. Isaiah tells us, "Be strong, fear not!" James reminds us to, "adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" and Jesus commands, "Be opened"! Today we say in "Amen" to God who wants to be an eye and ear-opening reality in our lives.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

StuhlmueLLer, Carroll, ed. THE COLLEGEVILLE PASTORAL DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

The best of American biblical and pastoral theologians have put this collection together to honor Carroll StuhlmueLLer. The emphasis is pastoral, and so it is a great aid for those needing material that would be useful for preaching, teaching and liturgy. Shows the influence of the bible on the pastoral and liturgical life of the Church. Also good for retreat preaching when background material is needed for conferences based on biblical themes, e.g. desert, discipleship, Eucharist, etc.. It's a great resource book and, you guessed it, it's expensive!

QUOTABLE

I suspect that many eyes gazing up from the pews at the Sunday preacher are glazed rather than enraptured.... That the people in the pews accept the paraphrasing of familiar Gospel readings as the norm for most Sunday sermons is a reflection of their tolerance for the mediocre; it does not speak well for the importance Vatican II places on the Liturgy of the Word.

Seminaries need to teach homiletics as more than a minor subject. The course must consist in more than a schedule of practice sermons by students who may be steeped in theology and filled with personal spirituality but are starved of public speaking technique. Some reputable Protestant ministers may be willing to teach such courses.

Too many priests, aware of their own deficiencies in the art of preaching, have

joined the local Toastmasters Club, which is the nearest thing they can find to a preaching wellness center. Others priests are not sufficiently aware of their oratorical deficiencies-- few parishioners are outspoken enough to tell them —to look for remedial help. Along with periodic retreats to refresh their spirituality, priests should be required to spend at least two Sundays a year seated in the pews at some distant parish. Listening to what is for many parishioners a weekly occasion of long-suffering and more important, may be the only regular contact they have with the Gospels, can be a valuable teaching moment.

—Rod O'Connor in a letter to the editor, *Commonweal*, April 25, 2003, page 4.

JUSTICE NOTES

"Making a Difference"

Problems such as racism, hunger, and inequality seem so big that it's easy to feel small and powerless. How much of a difference can you actually make anyway? In truth, you can make one person's difference—no more, no less. On a daily basis, you not only have the power to perpetuate the world's problems, you have the opportunity to stand up for the creation of a world based on your own deeply held values..

1. Your money invested in the right bank could help create more wealth for poor communities.
2. Your letter can be the one that changes the behavior of an entire corporation.
3. Your vote can elect government officials that really make a difference.
4. Your timely call to a friend can change their outlook for the day.
5. Your donation can help a social change organization meet its lofty goals.
6. Your purchase can allow a locally owned business to thrive in your community
7. Your participation can transform a small group of people into the beginnings of a social movement.

----E. Jones, R. Haenfler and B. Johnson with B. Klocke in *The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions*, quoted in "Spirituality and Health," Summer, 2002, page 76

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about

them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Gary A. Tull #0412440 (on death row since 11/19/96)
- Todd C. Boggess #0510801 (3/24/97)
- Lawrence E. Peterson #0320825 (12/12/96)
- Henry L. Wallace #0422350 (1/29/97)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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