



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 10 September 2006
Title: **"Ephphatha."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 35:4-7
Second Reading James 1:17-27
Gospel Mark 7:31-37

During the years in which I was chaplain to the Anglican congregation in Helsinki, Finland in the early 1990's, we met for worship in a chapel in a side tower of the Lutheran Cathedral on Senate Square. It was a magnificent neo-classical building, dating from the mid 19th century when Finland was part of imperial Russia. We were very fortunate to be able to use such an impressive and historical building because all visiting tourists knew exactly where we were: they had already been there on the city tours!

Over the altar in our chapel was a big painting by a famous Finnish artist. It showed the event that is described in today's Gospel: the healing of the deaf man. I was told that this painting dated from the time when a deaf congregation used the chapel, the way that we were doing then. Several generations had grown up worshipping God with that image in front of them, and when I once suggested that a more suitable subject might be found, it was one of our young people who countered that the painting had great significance for him. He wasn't handicapped, but felt that the painting and its theme had personal significance for him.

That experience reminded me that there is more to the stories of Jesus' healing sickness and handicap than the physical change that is often the most visible part of the cure. We have often talked about the gift of sight referring not only to the eyes, but also to the heart and the mind.

I have often wondered, however, how the handicapped receive these stories of healing. We who are seeing and hearing can heave a collective sigh of relief at the end of the story: "Oh isn't that nice: now he's just like the rest of us." The blind and deaf must always translate the miracle into the metaphysical level of spiritual and mental healing. But they can't share the relief: that lucky person who was cured is *no longer like them*. Miraculous cures of the eye and ear and tongue do take place, thanks not only to medical advances but also to God's omniscient will and His compassion. But miraculous cures of minds and hearts closed by pain, or sorrow or grief- these happen too. For that, ask the blind and the deaf. Ask the handicapped and the injured. Ask the bereaved and the depressed. Ask those who have been taught by God to use their limitations, their seeming lack of wholeness to proclaim God's ability to do all things well, and to use us, handicaps and all.

One of the most famous preachers in Christian history, John Chrysostom, once wrote that those who are healed in this age from whatever sickness or infirmity are always healed for "more crosses" that they will bear. The greatest of the saints have taught that when divine healing is given on earth is to give glory to God, confirm other Christians in their faith, show those without faith their error, produce repentance and, finally, to allow the person who is healed more time in which to proclaim the Gospel, witness to Christ, struggle against sin and serve their neighbors.

A wonderful story is told about a monk living in the Egyptian desert who prayed to God to take his passions away so that he could be free from care. He went and told his religious teacher: "I am at peace. I have no enemies." The old man answered him, "Go, ask God to stir up spiritual warfare in you so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the souls makes progress. And the monk did pray to God, and when the spiritual warfare came, he no

longer prayed that it might be taken away, but rather with these words: "Lord, give me strength for the fight."

The word used to describe the man's problem in today's Gospel is a rare one, μοιλάλος. In the New Testament, it only occurs here. When it is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it means one who stammers. This seems to imply that the cure that Jesus brings to the man is more than just the ability to hear or even just to make sounds, but the skill at speaking clearly. The essence of good evangelism is to share what God has done in the life of the person who is speaking. One can immediately tell if a preacher or evangelist is just going through the motions: proclaiming a kingdom that he or she has never visited, and a King he or she has never met. A person who has never been touched by Jesus can't really share the content of Jesus' Gospel in any but a theoretical way. Such a person will normally be found out- eventually the people of God will uncover the fact that he is an imposter, or that person's own conscience will no longer allow him or her to perpetrate the charade.

For that reason, I ask your prayers for me and for all clergy who must proclaim this Gospel, that we do so from the heart, not only from the mind; using our education of course, but first of all using our faith. One of St Paul's judges once claimed that the apostle's great learning had driven him mad. [Acts 26:24] Great learning can also make one deaf, blind and dumb to the truth of God in Christ- something that can oftentimes be far too simple a prospect than can be handled by intellectual pursuit alone, without the heart.

So today we are all encouraged to be opened, the way the man in today's Gospel story was. We are given the opportunity to hear and take to heart the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ to be opened to declaring our faith with our whole heart and to hear clearly and proclaim with articulate joy the command: Be opened!

And if you feel you don't have faith, or if it is weak- we can pray with that monk in the desert that you will be given the chance to prove yourself, discovering how God has already touched you, healed you, saved you, and prepared you for yet greater

things. You will see that He has been there all along, waiting to release the voice and the power within you. Be opened! And proclaim by your words and your life what God in Christ has done for you!