23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year B – 9/6/2015

“‘Ephphetha’, that is, ‘be open!’”

Isaiah 35:4-7
Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
James 2:1-5
Mark 7:31-37

Last week at the 9 o’clock Mass Fr. Noel, one of the Missionary priests from the Philippines blew me and I think everyone else away by beginning his homily with an incredible acapella song. I don’t recall the name of the song or even how it went, quite honestly, because I was so surprised and then moved by his exceptional voice. For those who didn’t hear it however, my explanation of it or any attempt on my part to duplicate it would fall short of experiencing it first-hand. But I can talk with others who heard it or tell people about it using all sorts of superlatives in order to convey a sense of what it was like and how moving it was. Music has that power to touch people in such a unique way but only if one actually hears it; only then can they truly experience it or tell others about it.

The man in today’s gospel experiences this but in a much, much more profound way. He doesn’t experience music…yet. Instead he experiences the Kingdom of God in his midst in the presence, words and actions of Jesus. Away from the crowd, one on one, Jesus touches the man’s tongue and ears and groans Ephphetha! an imperative that means “be open!” and his ears are opened and his tongue is freed. We are also called today to experience this very same thing. Jesus touching each and every one of us and saying “Ephphetha!”, “be open” to his word, to his example, to his mercy, to his love and to his sacrifice. Not only that but we are called to leave here with OUR mouths open to tell others, using all sort of superlatives in order to convey a sense of what God is like and how moving He is so that they can experience Him themselves.
This is what we are called to do through our baptism. In the Rite of Baptism after receiving the light of Christ in the form of the baptismal candle and before the conclusion there is the prayer of Ephphetha. The priest or deacon makes the Sign of the Cross on the lips and the ears of the newly baptized saying, “May [Jesus] soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.” For those in the RCIA who are to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, there is a Rite of Ephphetha that takes place on the morning of Holy Saturday prior to the Easter Vigil. This is to drive home to those being baptized and to all those witnessing it that the Christian life and our salvation is rooted in our ability to hear and speak the Word of God in the world.

This is important because we must not pretend that this Gospel message and the message of Christ is only for us here! This message is for everyone and that is why Mark tells us that Jesus performed this miracle in the district of the Decapolis. The Decapolis (Deca meaning “ten”; polis meaning “city”) was a district made up of ten cities outside of Israel inhabited by Greek speaking Gentiles. These details were meant to convey to Mark’s readers that salvation is for all those who are open to hearing Jesus’ word and sharing it with others. “Show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” as we hear in the second reading from James. The man who was healed was a Gentile who probably had no knowledge of Jesus and therefore beyond receiving the gift of hearing and the ability to speak clearly, he was given an opportunity to experience the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation.

“Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.” These are the words of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading today and they are meant to evoke the fulfillment of the promise that God made in His covenant with Abraham to those returning from exile. But in the context of today’s readings they comfort us and give us hope like the Israelites returning from Babylon, that all who are exiled either by sin or prejudice or lack of faith can still “be opened” by Jesus’ simple touch. Our “vindication” and “recompense” is the Kingdom of Heaven which Jesus ushered in once and for all through his death and resurrection for our salvation and the salvation of the whole world.
The world needs to hear this! The Word of God and His true message are getting drowned out in our world today by the shouts of extremism along with the din of relativism and religious apathy; the vehement demand for personal freedoms and liberty as well as the cries of those facing atrocities and the lack of basic human rights; the cacophony of violence in the streets of our country and the outcries of those suffering; the clamor for peace amid the tumult of political conflicts and war. Amid all this noise is the voice and message of Christ. We as his followers must not only “be open” to the voice of Christ in our midst, we must “be open” to hearing all of these various sounds in order to SPEAK UP in a way that addresses these various issues and concerns in the world in a manner that respects, honors and supports the truth of Christ’s message.

This is the essence of Ephphetha and what it truly means to “be open”. This is why we come here: to seek Christ and experience His healing for ourselves, first-hand. In his presence, in his word and in his body and blood we are touched by God in order to be healed. In these same ways however we also hear his Word more clearly so we can proclaim our faith in Him more boldly and courageously over the noise of the world outside these walls, the modern Decapolis if you will. We must also be open and willing to go and share our experience of God with those who haven’t heard it in order to quiet the sounds of discord so that the voice of Christ can be heard more clearly. We must go and share the sweet music of the Kingdom of Heaven so that the hearts and minds of those we encounter will desire and be compelled to hear and experience it for themselves, first-hand, so that Christ will touch them as well and say to them, “Ephphetha” that is “be open!”