

In today's Gospel reading, we hear about the Lord performing a miraculous work through the power of His word. That's nothing too out of the ordinary for the earthly ministry of Jesus. But as we consider this event a little closer, we'll find it actually has a lot to say to another topic, namely that of evangelism. How is this? In both cases, the Word of God does the impossible!

So, to the account from Mark 7. A man is brought to Jesus who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Obviously, this man has a life full of difficulty, even suffering, to this point. In this case, it's worth noting that this man's suffering would've been tied to how it interfered with his ability to relate to other people. The reason why God created men with mouths and ears was to be able to communicate, to be in community. You might say our mouths and ears are a big part of what joins us to others.

Yet in spite of this man's great difficulty in connecting to those around him, the Lord has still given him people in his life who care for him. Perhaps they're family; perhaps they're friends. Whoever they are, they love this man and want what's good for him. And the best thing, it would seem, would be for him to be able to hear and speak.

Now, they can't fix that problem on their own. It's far beyond any of their abilities, or the abilities of any of the best physicians of the day. There's only one person who can heal this man: Jesus. So, though the family or friends can't heal the man, they can bring him to Jesus. And that's exactly what they do, even begging Jesus, pleading with Him on the man's behalf.

How does Jesus respond to their pleas? With compassion. Note one of the things Jesus does after taking the man aside privately: "And looking up to heaven, he sighed." This "sigh" isn't one of exasperation, Jesus sighing and wondering how many other people He's going to have to heal before He can be done for the day.

No, I would say that this is a sigh, a groan, of compassion. The same word is used in 2 Corinthians 5, where St. Paul writes about our longing to be restored in the new creation. "For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

Jesus sighs or groans out of compassion for the man, and for all humanity afflicted by the consequences of sin. He's the God who made this man, and every person, out of love, and He hates to see how sin has broken His good creation. That's why He came, after all, out of love, to restore fallen man to Himself.

In love, then, Jesus doesn't leave the man as he was. He puts His fingers in the man's ears, and after spitting He grabs the man's tongue. Were these just to show the man what He was about to do, or was His power working through these actions? The Bible doesn't tell us. But Jesus never does

anything just for show, so we can assume they were necessary. After this, He speaks a word to the man: “Ephphatha,” which St. Mark helpfully translates for us – “Be opened.”

To human reason, this doesn’t really make much sense. Not only is the miracle itself – healing through mere speech – beyond our understanding, but the way in which Jesus does it seems to be off. The man’s problem is that he’s deaf. He can’t hear when people speak. So then, what good does telling a deaf man’s ears to be opened do – especially with a light, airy word like “ephphatha,” which you and I might struggle to hear clearly if it was spoken to us. Why does Jesus choose to speak this miracle into being, rather than just leave it with the fingers in the ears and grasping the tongue? Those would at least make a little more sense than saying strange words to a deaf man.

Yet it’s precisely because of this that Jesus speaks and commands the man’s ears to be opened. He is showing that His words are the words of God, that they contain the very power of God. This miracle takes us back to creation, where the earth was some formless watery mass enshrouded with complete darkness, and God said, “Let there be light.” Such is the power in God’s word that when He speaks, reality must conform to what He said. This is true of the entire universe; it is true of a single man’s ears and tongue.

When Jesus – God in human flesh – tells a man’s ears to be opened, then they must open up, even if they were deaf as a post beforehand. Notice too how the word does all that is necessary. After Jesus speaks the command, we read, “And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” It wasn’t only the man’s ears. His tongue, bound by whatever speech impediment this man had endured, was immediately loosed, able to do whatever was necessary. And further, his brain, which had almost certainly never heard clear speech and wouldn’t know how to use this newly-loosed tongue, is immediately capable of bringing forth clear, plain speech from the man’s mouth.

God does all that is necessary to restore this man’s speech, and in so doing gives him the ability to come back into his community. He could now share his needs and hopes and thanksgivings with those around him, and hear and respond to theirs as well. He could now join them in the synagogue and hear the word and then respond with prayer and praise. Jesus had heard the pleas of those who cared for him, and responding in compassion restored what sin had broken.

What then does this have to do with evangelism? There are actually quite a few parallels, showing how God’s Word miraculously works to restore something much greater than earthly hearing and speech. There are many people out there who, from a spiritual standpoint, are like the deaf-mute man. Think back to our Epistle from last week, where we heard about how all mankind are dead in sin before God works in them. Their souls are like the man’s ears, unresponsive to the things of God.

Also included here are people who had faith at one point, but now that faith is either dying or dead. Perhaps they’d had their spiritual ears opened by Jesus at one point, but as God describes through Isaiah, they have closed their ears to His Word and stopped confessing Him with their tongues.

In both cases, because of spiritual deafness and muteness, such people are separated from the community of believers, like how the deaf-mute man’s afflictions separated him from the people around him.

What should we do toward such people? We must not “write them off,” take Cain’s attitude that we aren’t their keeper. No, God’s love in us should make us desire their restoration, just as the people cared for the deaf-mute man and desired his restoration. Like those friends, we ourselves aren’t capable of restoring someone’s soul. We don’t have the ability to open spiritual ears, or change hearts of stone to hearts of faith. We can’t heal them, but we can bring them to Jesus.

Jesus looks at all people with the same compassion with which He looked at the deaf-mute man. He sees how sin has broken every person, and He desires to make them whole again. He wants to bring each and every person back from spiritual death to eternal life with Him. That’s why He came and died on the cross, so that every sin would be covered, every transgression paid for. Part of evangelism, and of the Christian life in general, is remembering that every person you see – including the person you see when you look in the mirror – is someone for whom Christ died.

This great gift of forgiveness for all is then applied to individual people through faith. And how do we get faith? Our Epistle lesson says very clearly, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Just like with the deaf-mute man, restoration from sin comes through hearing the word of Christ.

Now, perhaps at this point, we might have objections, or at least questions. If someone is dead in their sins, what good will speaking to them do? Dead people can’t do anything – that’s the point! Or what if what Christ has to say in His word offends them? Or what if they already “know” what Christ has to say and don’t want to hear it again? In such cases, it might seem that speaking the word would be just as effective as speaking to a deaf man.

But remember, the words of Jesus contain the power of Jesus. As He would tell His apostles, “He who hears you hears me.” And in the book of Romans, St. Paul boldly confesses that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Remember also God’s promise through Isaiah, the His word will never go out and return to Him empty. God promises that His word will work, and we His people must believe that promise.

Sometimes God joins that word to physical objects, like water in Baptism, in the way that He physically touched the man’s ears and tongue before healing them. Other times, it is the word heard from the mouth of another Christian. Maybe it’s heard by being brought to church and hearing the word read and preached. Maybe it’s heard by simply being shared in conversation during daily life. Either way, where the word is spoken faithfully, it remains God’s word, and God will use it to accomplish whatever pleases Him.

Will some reject this word and stop up their ears are the more firmly? Sadly, yes. Many people do. Again, consider our text. Jesus commands one man’s ears to be opened and they are. But when He commands many to not speak, they ignore Him and go on speaking anyway.

Now, could Jesus have struck them all dumb, rendering them physically unable to speak? Sure He could’ve; He’s God. But in this occasion He was giving an example of how He allows us to resist

His word. He delights in granting faith and life through His word, but where people want to resist Him and harden themselves against His word, He will not force them to hear.

Yet where people do hear, repent, and believe the Gospel, the Lord gives incredible blessings. He grants restoration of the heart and soul. He gives ears to hear the truth of His word and tongues to speak to Him in prayer, letting those formerly isolated speak to Him as their own dear Father. He brings people into the community of believers, the family that isn't separated by space or time, but which covers the earth and will last into eternity.

And as St. Paul quotes from the Scriptures, "Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame." Rather, in the glorious new creation, all those who heard and believed the word will be raised to glory, made perfect in ways we can't even imagine. And that glory will never dim.

Remember, then, when you hear the word, and when you speak the word, it has the same power as it did when Jesus spoke that word – "Ephphatha!" He will work through His word, both in you and in those to whom you speak. He is God, and His word never fails.

In the name of Jesus, amen.