

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday (B)

5<sup>th</sup> September 2021

‘Ephphatha!’

Is 35: Look, your God is coming ...  
oppressed  
James 2: do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ with the  
making of distinctions between classes of people  
Ps 145: the Lord is just to those  
Mk 7: 31–37: cure of the deaf and dumb man

One of the (many) victims of the pandemic was the *Εφφαθα* (“*Ephphatha*”). What am I talking about? Well, in the Baptism Rite, the *Ephphatha* is the little ritual of the ‘opening of the ears and mouth.’ Over the course of the past year I have either had to suspend Baptisms, or celebrate them with just 6/15/30 participants, but for the most part celebrated without the *Ephphatha*. It happens to be optional anyway in England & Wales (why, I don’t know), but I never (previously) omitted it. It’s a beautiful moment in the liturgical actions after the Baptism proper, as the priest gently touches the ears and the mouth of the newly baptized, accompanied by the words, “*The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His faith.*” You might imagine that a small child, having this strange man in vestments coming right up close and touching first the ears and then the mouth would be pretty disconcerting,

but actually it rarely is! I reinstated it a couple of weeks ago; I specifically remember last Sunday, when I baptised two little girls, coincidentally both named Siena, that one in particular looked utterly serene at that moment, she looked at me with a wondrous peace in her eyes. Let’s think about its meaning, this *Ephphatha* — a real tongue-twister of a word, as it appears on the page! — where does it come from? Well, clearly, from today’s passage (Mk 7): “*Ephphatha*, that is, ‘Be Opened!’” as the Gospel explains.

In a number of places in the Gospels, the Gospel-writer, writing in Greek, chooses to leave un-translated a word or phrase in Our Lord’s original language, Aramaic. Think of Our Lord, crying out on the Cross “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*” Or St Mary Magdalene, on the morning of the Resurrection, crying out to the Risen Jesus, “*Rabbuni!*” On these occasions of great significance, sticking to the original Aramaic phrase seems to have been important to the evangelist, to capture something of the raw emotion of the moment. Here, today, we get another such occasion: Mark leaves in that word spoken by Jesus in His

native tongue, “*Ephphatha!*” — “be opened!” Jesus heals the deaf and dumb man of both of his afflictions, uttering this single direct command. A historical event — Jesus in His native Aramaic, intervening in the life of this poor man.

But we get the impression that this isn’t all. It’s not only about one man’s being healed, important though that was. It’s important also for his life of faith, and that of those around Him. Although Jesus deliberately performed this miracle to one side, in private, and asked that it wasn’t talked about, yet it gets mentioned everywhere. Jesus is seen to be acting as they long thought the Messiah would act — texts such as our first reading from Isaiah suggest this: “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed.” The Messiah would bring healing in His wake ... and He does. It’s convincing for many of those who experience it — they come to believe in Him.

We have retained this Aramaic word in our Baptism Rite in the *Ephphatha*, the ‘Prayer over the Ears and Mouth,’ It’s about faith: the Church clearly sees in this ritual a prayerful hope that the newly baptized will first

grow to learn about the faith, i.e. to *hear* the Word of God with the ears (and the heart!), and then, in due course, to *speak* of the faith with the mouth, to live it and profess it! “Be opened!” says Jesus to the new Christian! Don’t be closed to the Word of God; don’t be dead to the Gospel. Don’t be as someone deaf to the appeal of God in your life; don’t be as someone mute, who daren’t or won’t speak of things of faith!

This *Ephphatha* prayer isn’t just something quaint for our Baptism day, long gone and long forgotten! The *Ephphatha* remains something entirely relevant throughout our Christian lives. Are we going to have our ears shut, and lips closed, or are we going to “be opened”? In order to be Christians, alive and well, we have to “be opened”! We can’t profess to be Christians and yet be deaf and dumb regarding Christ. So we must ask ourselves, are our ears opened? Are we listening to Christ, in prayer and in His holy Word? Have we listened today to the Gospel? Have we heard Our Lord’s command to “be opened”? Have we taken it to heart? And are we opened up to Him, to His

longing and desire to be in our heart and mind? And, then, have we opened our mouths in His honour? Have we spoken of Him, defended Him, acted in His ways? Are we professing our faith, daily, by what we say and do?

*“The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His Faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.”* We have to ask ourselves if that prayer, uttered when we were baptized, has fallen on deaf ears; have we ignored it, or have we done our very best to co-operate with all the opportunities God has given us for listening to Him, and speaking for Him? That word, *Ephphatha*, cries out from the Gospel today, boldly and loudly, so that we hear it and take note. Jesus is appealing to you to hear that command of His: “Be opened!” — “Please be open to Me,” He says, “please listen to Me, and speak for Me.” Jesus needs us, His Church, to be His ears and His lips in the world, to hear of the needs, and to speak the words of faith, consolation, and Gospel. *Be opened!*

For me, arriving on Wednesday, the most important

thing was not to unpack the boxes, or even to get the PC and e-mail going, but to announce ‘Be Opened’! regarding this chapel! — to celebrate the Holy Mass once more, and to return the Blessed Sacrament to the tabernacle. This our chapel, blessed with the sacred presence of Jesus Christ, offering Himself every day on this altar in the Mass, is the very heart of this house; thank God it is now re-opened. Please use this chapel, daily and regularly — how privileged we are to have the Mass, to have Jesus, right here in our very house! How many Catholics would love to have what we have — a house chapel?! We have it, so let’s allow this great blessing to flood through our souls.

Very shortly (next Sunday) our whole house will again hear that cry, ‘Be Opened’ and we will set about that crucial task of bringing others in, especially in to meet Jesus in the Mass and in prayer. Be open to Him in Mass today! Be open to Him in a renewed way in this year ahead. Be open to bringing other to Him ... that’s your baptismal task, begun when the priest touched your ears and mouth; “Be Opened to Christ” *Ephphatha!*